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Author: **Ameko Kaeruda**  
Illustrator: **Kazutomo Miya**

# SEXILED

My Sexist Party Leader Kicked Me Out,  
So I Teamed Up With a **Mythical Sorceress!**



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2

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# SEXILED 2

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"...WHAT?! LADY  
STONE COLD  
STUNNER?!"

Arianora Aweigkorrt

The Crown Princess of Pajan. After watching Lilium compete in the Sparring Tournament, she's now their biggest fan.



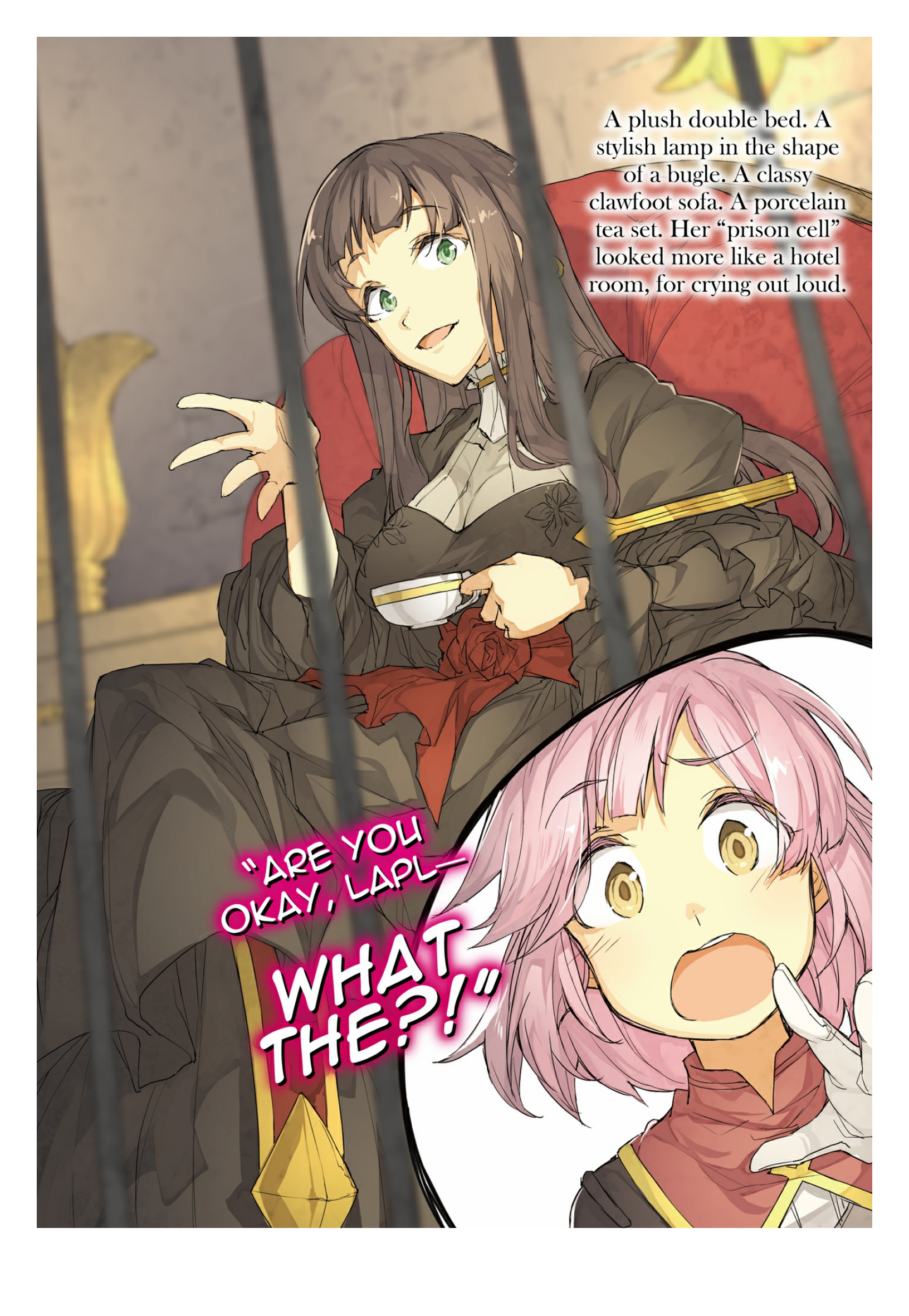




"TAKE THIS!  
EXPLOSION!!!"

"WELL, THIS IS  
GOODBYE,  
MAXWELL...  
YOU SAD SON  
OF A BITCH."





A plush double bed. A stylish lamp in the shape of a bugle. A classy clawfoot sofa. A porcelain tea set. Her “prison cell” looked more like a hotel room, for crying out loud.

“ARE YOU  
OKAY, LAPL—

WHAT  
THE?!”



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# Prologue: Onwards and Upwards

## 1

The Empire of Pajan was a small peninsular country bordered by the ocean. There, in the capital city of Ode, there was a new rising star in the Adventurers' Guild: an all-female party called Lilium. They were a more than competent trio who took first place in the Guild-sponsored Sparring Tournament shortly after their party was first formed.

What's more, their work ethic stayed strong in spite of their growing fame. When someone needed help, they were there to lend a hand. No matter the job, they stuck it out to the very end. That was Lilium's *modus operandi*.

The average adventurer was motivated by simple pleasures: money, fame, popularity with their preferred gender, and more money. This meant that less glamorous quests were often sloppily handled or else left to gather dust on the bulletin board. But each quest, at its core, was a cry for help. Thus, Lilium always committed 100% to the quests they took, even if the client couldn't pay much in reward money.

Soon the entire city was singing their praises, and they'd built a strong reputation with the Guild, too. Hence, they were often asked to accompany low-ranked and inexperienced parties on more challenging quests; in fact, some parties even requested them by name.

Why, you ask? Because they knew they could count on Lilium to get the job done right.

## 2

Goblin extermination: the most common quest in the city of Ode.

These small, impish monsters liked to inhabit the southern mountain pass in great numbers. Because this mountain pass was a critical juncture for supply



lines in and out of the city, inevitably someone needed to go down and clear out the infestation from time to time.

Though it was your run-of-the-mill, garden-variety quest, goblins could be dangerous in large numbers. Thus, whenever a newbie party was looking to embark on this mission for the first time, a more experienced party was assigned to serve as their bodyguards...

“Seriously...?” Tanya Artemiciov muttered as she stared blankly at the scene unfolding before her.

Her pastel pink hair hung to just above her shoulders. Her armor was both functional *and* fashionable. And on her back, she carried a greatsword that was larger than she was. This was the leader of the famous Lilium.

As for the situation she found herself in, well—

“Wh-Whoaaa!!! Curse these goblins! Hyah! Hyah! Take that!”

“D-Do you *know* who I am?! I hail from the Noble House of Reinhardt! If you so much as lay a finger on me, rest assured, m-my *father* will be hearing about it!”

“It’s hopeless... I don’t stand a chance... I’m just not cut out to exterminate goblins...”

A short distance from her, three men were attempting to fight a handful of goblins. This was a brand-new party that had just registered with the Guild last spring, and their lack of experience was palpable. One was swinging his expensive equipment around indiscriminately, one was boasting about his lineage, and one was having an emotional breakdown. Needless to say, they had yet to defeat a single goblin between the three of them.

*How are these dudes so freaking incompetent?!* Tanya wanted to scream—but her job was to stand guard and watch, so she held back. Even the goblins looked uncomfortable.

“GRAAAHHHH!!! Do you know who I am?!” one of them shouted at the goblins.

*Are we supposed to?* Tanya thought to herself. *Because I sure don’t.*



“Uh, guys? At the rate you’re going, we’ll need to retreat. The main swarm’s going to be on top of us any minute now,” she warned them.

Traditionally, goblins preferred to fight in large groups. The key to exterminating them was to take them out quickly before they could send a signal to the rest of the colony.

Sadly, this warning fell on deaf ears.

“Stay back, lady! It’s not safe!” one of them shouted, completely straight-faced. Almost like he thought he was being chivalrous or something.

“What are you talking about? I’m your bodyguard, remember?!”

“This is a man’s job! Leave it to the men!”

“You might want to save the chauvinism for when you’re *not* about to get mauled to death!”

And yet they refused to listen. Meanwhile, Tanya was fuming. These men had written her off entirely due to her gender. *Fucking morons*. This was something that had happened a lot back in her previous party.

“Fine, whatever. It’s your funeral.”

*Go ahead and try it your way. Maybe then you’ll learn your lesson. Seriously, they’re just goblins.*

Ten minutes later...

“HEEEELP!!!” the men wailed in unison as the goblins beat them senseless.

“Told you so!”

But they were too busy flailing against the swarming goblin horde to pay any heed to her retort. *Guess it’s high time I stepped in.*

“You there! Don’t move!”

Tanya unsheathed her greatsword and held it in front of her. As a Magi-Knight, this was her trusted companion. It was a blade patterned after Excalibur, the magical weapon described in the old legends. And she called it... the Not-Excalibur.

*Mana circuits, activate! Fire Magic, engage!*

Mana flowed through her body and into the sword. She raised it high... and brought it down.

“HYAAAAAAHHH!!!”

The Fire-type spell shot forward in a flash of light and set them all ablaze—all except the three men, of course. This was no ordinary fire, however. In an instant, the goblins had all burned to ash.

“Eeeek!”

“Wh... No incantation?! What the hell *was* that?!”

“What kind of Knight casts magic?!”

All at once, the men had started to see her in a new (and terrifying) light. A minute ago she was “just some chick,” and now she was “a badass who could toss Fire Magic around without a word.” She was their Guild-assigned bodyguard, but only now did they actually respect her.

*Why do they automatically assume they’re more capable than me? Where does that groundless confidence come from? Their c—?*

This was a callback to a comment she’d made some months ago, but before she could finish her train of thought, the other party’s Mage interrupted.

“Wait, but... the spell hit everything except for us! How did you do that?! What kind of insane accuracy do you have?!”

“Huh? Oh, actually, that wasn’t me.”

Just then, a singsong voice called from above them:

“*Oui, oui!* I daresay you owe it all to the beautiful—no, the stunning—no, the stunningly beautiful Lap—”

“Allow me to introduce Stone Cold Stunner!” Tanya shouted hastily as a woman dressed in black floated down and embraced her from behind.

Naturally, “Stone Cold Stunner” was a fake name. Her real name was Laplace, but unfortunately that wasn’t the sort of name they could throw around willy-nilly, and for good reason. Laplace was well-known as the mythical Sorceress who had conspired to destroy the entire nation and was thus sealed away



forevermore—or so all the history books claimed.

“She’s... She’s *floating*?! Is that levitation magic?!”

“*Oui, oui*! Levitation is my bread and butter. And if it wasn’t for my force field, you three would be nothing but cinders right about now, so I do hope you’re grateful.”

The Mage turned white as a sheet. “L-Levitation magic... and a *force field*...?! You’re dabbling in forbidden magic! Who *are* you?!”

Likewise, the party leader was sulking because, god forbid, a woman had stolen his thunder.

“Damn it... I wanted to show off for the girls, but then they’re stronger than me? What a crock of shit!”

Nevertheless, the embrace continued.

“C-Could you let go?! That hurts!”

“*Non, non*! I did my best to stay out of it like you asked, but just listen to the things they’re saying! Are you alright, my dear?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. I knew we’d be fine with you watching over us. Plus, I mean... they’re not even as dangerous as the goblins. C’mon.”

“Heh heh heh! I’m sure they’re no match for you. Or me, for that matter. But just so you’re clear, you have my full permission to punch anyone who disrespects you.”

“Punch them?! That’s horrible! Thanks, though. I appreciate the thought.”

The two women shared a giggle.

Meanwhile, the disgruntled nobleman glared around at his surroundings. He’d been hoping to flaunt his social status to win both their affections, but now it was clear that they only had eyes for each other. He didn’t even try to hide the scowl on his face.

“...I deserve this much, at least.”

He bent down and scooped up a jewel lying forgotten at his feet—treasure

that the goblins had probably looted from a dungeon somewhere prior to their incineration. And after the indignity he'd suffered, he was more than happy to take it as a consolation prize.

But right as he moved to pocket the gem—

“Stop right there.”

“Huh?”

—someone grabbed his wrist and twisted it behind his back.

“Ow ow owww!”

“Adventurers’ Guild Regulations, Article 23, Paragraph 6: All item drops must be submitted to the Guild for preliminary review.”

“Stop! That hurts! Aagh!”

That “someone” was a woman with big, round glasses and long lavender hair worn in two braids. Her Healer’s staff looked completely out of place in the hands of someone wearing a black combat suit.

“Oh, Nadine!”

Her name was Nadine Amaryllis. And while she served as Liliium’s Healer—  
“You’re hurting me, damn it! How did you sneak up on me like that? I didn’t even hear you coming!”

—she was once a talented Assassin whose bloodstained legacy was hidden in the shadows of the nation’s history. Having lost her entire family, she ended up working as a receptionist at the Adventurers’ Guild, where she met Tanya and eventually joined Liliium.

“Nice work, everyone. As a former Guild worker, I can confidently say the quest is complete.” Smiling, she continued to subdue the aristocrat. “As such, we’ll need to report your offensive comments, attempted embezzlement of item drops, and combat performance.”

“You can’t do that! Let me go... Damn it, how are you all so strong?! You’re just *women!*”

But the ladies of Liliium simply ignored him and walked off.



The quest was complete. Now it was time to head home and throw a party.

### 3

“Well, well!” Laplace exclaimed.

When they arrived back at the Guild to deliver their report, they found a crowd of girls awaiting their return and gazing at them with sparkles in their eyes. Ever since Lilium was crowned the first-ever all-female party to win the Sparring Tournament, their popularity had shot through the roof.

“Tell us how your quest went!”

“Tanya, Tanya! Shake my hand!”

“Ohhhh my gosh, it’s Stone Cold Stunner!!! She’s so beautiful!!!”

“Nadine! I, um... I’m your biggest fan! I respect you so much!”

For girls who dreamed of one day going on adventures—be it as a Mage, a Healer, or any other class—Lilium was a female empowerment icon. But though they were enjoying a meteoric rise to stardom, something still weighed on Tanya’s mind.

“...Laplace?” she called out quietly.

Beside her, the Great Sorceress bobbed absently in midair. “...Huh? Did you say something, Tanya?”

“You seem kind of... distracted lately.”

Every now and then, her beloved partner in crime would sink deep into thought.

And to Tanya, she seemed... sad about something.





# Chapter 1: The Cursed Coin

## 1

“That reminds me, Nadine,” Laplace spoke suddenly, “what is that contraption you wear on your face?”

“Huh? Oh, these? These are my glasses.”

“They’re called ‘glasses’?”

“Yes, glasses.”

“Interesting,” Laplace muttered as she scrutinized Nadine’s face.

“Uh, Laplace?! We’re trying to take down an Earth Wyrms, remember?! Is this really the best time for idle chitchat?!” Tanya shouted. A split-second later, a beam of light shot from the tip of her Not-Excalibur, and a loud BWOOOOM cut through the air.

Here lies Earth Wyrms, R.I.P.

Now then, a few days after the Earth Wyrms met an untimely end—  
“NOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

Early one morning, before the sun had fully risen, a scream echoed through the hotel room that Lilium called home. Laplace snapped awake, jumped out of bed, and reflexively dove on top of Tanya.

“Oups! What’s going on?! Are you alright, Tanya?!”

“Huh?! Wh... Laplace, get off of me! I can’t breathe! Get! Off! Me!”

“Non, non! We might be under attack! You’ll be safe here in the arms of the Great Sor—gggpphhh!”

“I asked nicely the first time! That’s what you get!”

“I can’t believe you’d just shove me away face-first... That’s my Tanya for you... hee hee... so strong...”

Laplace rubbed her red cheek. Meanwhile, Tanya peered over her shoulder at their surroundings.

The scream had come from Nadine. She was standing stock-still, holding her glasses in her trembling hands. One of the lenses had fallen out, and now it was cracked.

“Oof, that’s not good.”

“Tanya... Laplace... I’m so sorry to wake you at this hour...”

“Nah, that’s okay. I’m more worried about your poor glasses!”

“Yes, me too...” Nadine slumped her shoulders.

“I don’t understand. What’s the matter?” Laplace asked, confused.

Tanya turned to her.

“Well, Laplace... It looks like we’ll need to run some errands today.”

## 2

Eyeglasses: a magical vision-correcting tool created by mounting two lenses in a metal or wooden frame. The material for these “lenses” contained faint traces of mana; it could be harvested from any dungeon, then shaped into flat, translucent panes via precision processing. (Sadly, the technology to create this magical material from scratch had been lost to time.) “I see... So these ‘glasses’ are something of a dungeon artifact?”

“Yes, exactly! I knew you’d understand, Laplace!”

“We had dungeons back in my day, you know, 300 years ago. But back then we didn’t really have time to explore them—too busy with the wars and all that. I didn’t realize they were littered with such nifty stuff! *C’est magnifique!*”

“To be clear, most of what you’ll find in a dungeon is just magical junk. You won’t find piles of lenses just lying around in there.”

“Correct. That’s why finding the perfect lens is sometimes purely a matter of luck,” Nadine sighed sadly.

“Nadine, who are you talking to?! That’s not Laplace—that’s a utility pole!” Tanya shouted.

“What?! Oh goodness, I’m so sorry!”

“*Mon dieu!* Oh, Nadine, you little rascal!”

“I... I’m really sorry, Laplace!” Nadine fell to her knees in apology.

“Uh, Nadine... That’s a piece of hanging jerky...”

“*What?!?*”

“Let’s just hurry up and get you that new lens, okay?!”

“Okay!”

Taking Nadine by the hand, they gingerly guided her down the street. The second they took their eyes off her, she’d crash face-first into one passerby after the next. *Good lord, where did all these people come from?*

“Let’s try to take it slow, okay, Nadine?”

“*Oui, oui!* The beautiful Laplace is right behind you!”

“Nngh... Thank you...”

“Aw, no problem! You can make it up to us by treating us to dinner at the Little Vixen,” Laplace joked.

The Little Vixen was a popular, long-standing tavern located right here in the capital. And, as of late, it had turned into Lilium’s main hangout.

“Oh, there it is!”

Slowly but surely, they walked and walked... until at last, they arrived at the magic supply store in south Ode.

“Hmmm... None of these are a good match...”

Nadine stood in front of an array of lenses, each one a slightly different color, opacity, and price. After trying on the very last one, she set it down with a sigh.

“I’m sorry... I’m afraid this one isn’t right for me, either.”

“That’s a shame,” replied the shopkeeper, a small girl by the name of Miku. “Our selection’s not the best. Sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”



“No, no, it’s not your fault.”

“Tell you what—I’ll get the special ones. You should try them on, just in case.”

With that, she retrieved a red velvet box from inside the cupboard behind the counter. The way she handled it made it clear the contents were highly valuable.

“This lens was harvested from Kujushin Dungeon, the most challenging dungeon in the greater Ode area. And this one was retrieved from Yor-Kohama Dungeon on the gulf coast.”

At this, Tanya whirled around. “What?! Yor-Kohama Dungeon?!”

While their beloved party leader had gained extraordinary strength as a Magi-Knight, at her core she was still a very studious person. This was the same woman who was once known as the Guild’s most talented Mage; when it came to anything magic-related, be it spells or magical tools, you could be sure she was interested in knowing more. In fact, you could say she was a little... obsessed. And this most certainly applied to dungeons chock-full of magical artifacts.

“Yor-Kohama Dungeon, as in, the one that has a supposedly infinite number of floors?! The one that changes its layout every time you return to it?! Man, I’ve always wanted to go exploring in there—my old party leader would never let me! But anyone who has even a basic knowledge of magic would *kill* to explore Yor-Kohama! There’s so much of it no one’s ever seen... Wait, so is this lens really powerful?!”

Seriously, she could go on and on like that for hours if the others let her. Laplace smiled at her with the warmth of a clear spring day. Tanya’s unbridled passion for magic never ceased to amaze her.

“That’s my Tanya, alright. Wouldn’t have her any other way.”

“Oh goodness, there she goes again... Is this lens really that remarkable?” Nadine asked, gingerly lifting, and inserting it into the try-on glasses to test it out. “Hmmm... Wha—whoa?!”

“What’s wrong, Nadine?!”

“It’s all spinny!”

“Huh?!”

“The lens... It adjusted itself to match my vision...!”

“*What?!*” Tanya shouted. She’d never heard of auto-adjusting lenses, and she was *excited*. “Where on earth did you find this gem?!”

“These are some of our best items in stock. You see, the boss is a bit of an odd case—she’s one of the few women registered with the Magi-Crafters’ Guild. She’s an alcoholic, and her life is a total mess, but she’s also an exceptionally talented Magi-Crafter! And although she’s currently traveling the country looking for new inventory... she left me some instructions.”

“What sort of instructions?”

“She said that in the event Lilium stopped by the store while she was gone, she wanted me to offer you everything we have, even the forbidden stuff!” Miku grinned. “She’s a big fan of yours, see. I bet she’ll be so jealous that I got to talk to you... See, whenever anyone brings you up, she always gets this big smile on her face! And she’s really not the kind of person who smiles on a regular basis! Normally she’s a total grouch!”

Tanya giggled. Miku was clearly very fond of her boss—you could hear it in her voice.

“A grouchy boss, eh? Reminds me of my old mentor.”

“I mean, don’t get me wrong—she has her good points, too!”

“Hahaha! I would always jump to my mentor’s defense the exact same way!”

Miku blushed furiously. She took a deep breath, collected herself, then turned back to Nadine with a friendly, professional smile. “What do you say, miss?”

“Yes, it’s perfect! I’ll buy it!” Nadine exclaimed, relieved to have found a match at last.

“Then it’s a deal. But you can keep your money.”

“What?!”

It was obvious this was part of her boss’s “instructions” regarding Lilium... but

Tanya couldn't accept it. And Tanya Artemiciov was the sort of woman who acted on instinct.

*"Unacceptable!"* she shouted, slamming a large leather bag full of silver coins onto the counter with a loud *THUD*.

"Gah! No, really, my boss told me—"

"I don't care what your boss told you! You need to take the money!" Her integrity simply wouldn't allow it. "I get that you're just trying to help us out, but you don't need to treat us differently from any other customer! It's unfair!"

"Unfair...?"

"That's right. Back in my old party, I was always given 'special treatment' just because I was a woman, and it was awful. That's why I entered into the Sparring Tournament—to get back at them."

She recalled the injustice she'd endured. Looking back, the idea of firing a party member solely due to their gender still seemed ridiculous to the point of insanity. And that was precisely why she was so opposed to preferential treatment in all its forms.

"I just can't stomach that kind of biased thinking, you know? I want to be treated just the same as anyone else, no matter what gender I am or what party I'm in."

*"Oui, oui.* It goes against our policy, you could say."

"Yes, exactly!" Tanya said, relieved to have backup.

"I see..." Miku sighed. While she deeply respected her boss, this was the first time she'd ever thought of another woman as being *powerful*. Now she understood why her boss had come home from the Sparring Tournament completely smitten. These women were just so dignified.

"Just take it, okay?"

"O-Okay... Wait, what the?"

"Hmm?" Tanya cocked her head.

Miku had very nearly gone along with it, but she caught herself in the nick of



time and retorted at the top of her lungs: “Why would you give me *an entire bag of silver*?! That’s too much!”

“Huh? Oh... Haha... I dunno, just tell your boss you made a lot of sales while she was gone!”

“Uh-oh, Tanya’s a sloppy spender,” Laplace snickered, and the others laughed along with her.

While Nadine’s new lens underwent processing to fit her frames, Miku let them look at the supply store’s “behind-the-counter” products.

“Oh my goddd! Are these nesting golem dolls from my hometown?! No, that can’t be right. The spell formula is too old... and really elaborate... Is this another magical artifact excavated from a dungeon?! Oh my god, oh my god!!!”

“Your hometown, you say?”

“Yeah! I’m from a snowy island up north called Irigel. Wait... Oh my god, is this a seal talisman from O’toyok Dungeon?! Holy crap, look at the formula! I can’t read a single word of it! This is *amazing*!”

The resident magic geek was, naturally, geeking out like crazy. Smiling to herself, Laplace wandered along, looking at each of the “special” items set out on the counter.

As a Great Sorceress who’d been alive 300 years ago, the vast majority of them were of little interest to her, save for the artifacts excavated from the dungeons. After all, these were relics from before her time, harvested from what amounted to historical locations. She couldn’t help but be a little curious.

Then her gaze landed on a small box, curious, her slender fingers lifted the lid—and she froze. The color drained from her face.

Inside was a single coin.

“Is this...?”

“Hmm? What’s up, Stone Cold Stunner?”

“*Pardonnez-moi, mademoiselle*. Is this coin one of your ‘artifacts,’ too?”

At Laplace’s question, Miku peeked out from the lens workstation in the back.

“Oho, you have good taste! That right there is one of Laplace’s Orichalcum Coins!”

“What?! Aren’t they insanely rare?!” Tanya shouted, goggling down at it in surprise. She’d only heard of them in passing.

Meanwhile, Laplace stared down at the coin, unmoving. Normally she was all smiles and jokes, but right now, there was an uncharacteristically hard look plastered on her face.

“Uh, La—Stone Cold Stunner?” Tanya asked timidly, conscious of Miku’s presence. To keep her true identity hidden from the public at large, this Great Sorceress was currently masquerading as no more than the beautiful and talented Stone Cold Stunner from the Sparring Tournament.

“So you’re saying,” Laplace began slowly, in a low whisper, “this item is known as Laplace’s Orichalcum Coin?”

“Huh? Yes, that’s right. They say the Great Sorceress herself minted a whole bunch of them by mixing gold with a rare alloy called orichalcum. That said, there’s no record of anyone ever using them as currency. Oh, but rumor has it these coins were cursed by Laplace herself! They’re imbued with a really intricate spell formula. All the magic nerds go ga-ga over them... Like that one, for example.”

“Huh?! N-No I’m not!” Tanya frantically wiped the drool from the corner of her mouth.

“Interesting. So you were told that I made these.”

“Wait... *You*...?”

“Gah! Uhhh, just disregard that! I think she’s a little tired today!” Tanya hastily cut in.

They couldn’t afford to let the townspeople find out that the mythical Great Sorceress was walking among them once more. The entire city would fall into chaos.

“I don’t know how these coins get circulated, but for some reason, it seems like every magic supply store in Ode has at least one,” Miku continued.

“What?”

“No joke. Me and the boss went to a town hall meeting a while ago, and there were tons of people bragging about their collections.”

“Hmmm... I see... Your name’s Miku, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Could I purchase this coin?” Laplace smiled affably.

“You certainly can, but... I’m afraid that bag of silver...”

“Isn’t enough?”

“Yeah... Sorry...”

“*C’est bon*. There’s more where that came from. Right, Tanya?”

“What?! You want *me* to pay for it?!”

“Hahaha! Oh, I’m just kidding around! Tell me, do you accept these?”

“What are these...? Oh, wow! Antique currency!”

Most modern stores didn’t accept the 300-year-old money Laplace carried, but this was a shop that dealt in ancient relics.

“It’ll fit right in with your other artifacts, don’t you think? Alternatively, you could melt it down and use it in tool crafting. It’s got a higher gold composition than modern money, after all.”

“But... this is really too much...!”

“Nonsense! Just tell your boss you picked up some new stock while she was gone. I’m sure she’ll be over the moon! I mean, these are the real deal, you know. I used this money all the time 300 years ago.”

“What?”

“Nothing!!! Don’t worry about it!!! Right, Stone Cold Stunner?!?!?”

“Hahaha! Right, right! Don’t worry about it!”

Secretly, Tanya was relieved to see Laplace laughing again, because her reaction to the orichalcum coin had been kind of frightening. Was it actually hers? Tanya wanted to ask, but now wasn’t the time.



“Safe journeys, Liliun! Come back again soon so you can meet the boss, okay?”

And so they left the store, Laplace with her single coin and Nadine with her newly fixed glasses. Their destination: the Little Vixen.

## Chapter 2: The Foxkin Mage Joins The Party

### 1

The Little Vixen was a popular and long-standing tavern run by an old albino foxkin woman. Among those of nobility with a more refined palate, this was the capital's best-kept secret, worthy of an undercover visit; among the working class, practically everybody knew about it.

Despite the establishment's considerable age, the architecture and furnishings all gleamed honey-gold, indicating frequent cleaning. The restaurant wouldn't open to the public for a few hours yet, but nevertheless, a few VIP customers were seated around a table.

"Hell yeah, let's chow down!" Tanya shouted, her voice echoing across the empty dining hall.

"Oh wow, I can't wait!" Nadine chimed in.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just shut up and taste it for me, alright?" Katherine snapped.

Plated before Tanya was a large helping of deep-fried chicken bites, creamy tomato pasta, and potato wedges fried a foxy golden brown, their warm, crispy exterior concealing a sweet, starchy interior. As she munched along, an apron-clad Katherine put her hands on her hips and proudly thrust out her chest, her pointy fox ears twitching atop her head of long blonde hair.

"Mmmm! It'sh *sho good*! I wish Laplashe wash here to eat thish with ush!"

"And you made all this yourself, Katherine? That's incredible!"

"Heh heh! Nah, it's nothing special."

Katherine Foxxi was a Mage-class adventurer. Originally she had registered with the Guild in the hopes of landing herself a good man, but after the Sparring Tournament, she quit her party. According to her, "After watching you guys, I'm starting to think this man-hunting stuff is just a waste of my time."

As a Mage, she was quite gifted; even Tanya was impressed at the extreme mana efficiency of her custom spell fusion, which combined ordinary attack magic with secret albino foxkin techniques... but now she was just a waitress at her grandma's restaurant.

As Nadine worked her way through her plate of chicken, her eyes lit up. "Katherine, this food is amazing! Really, I mean it!"

"Y-Yeah? For real?"

"Yes! I've never cooked before, so I'm not sure how to describe what I like about it, but... it's just *delicious*!"

"You think people would pay money for it?"

"Absolutely! It's *divine*! The chicken is so juicy!"

"Heehee! Nadine's our resident meat lover, so if it's got her stamp of approval, it's guaranteed to sell," Tanya nodded. "Mmmm, this pasta is great!"

"L-Look... Don't you people have any, y'know, constructive criticism? Your stupid compliments aren't gonna help me improve!"

As it turned out, there was more to Katherine than her glamorous good looks—she was a hard worker and a damn good cook, too.





## 2

These days, a corner of the Little Vixen was officially reserved for Liliu.

As the nation's first-ever all-female champions of the Sparring Tournament, Liliu had captured the hearts of women all over the city. They couldn't walk down the street without someone inevitably stopping them to ask for their autographs, and then a crowd would form, and the next thing they knew, they'd end up roped into an impromptu fan meet and greet. Following their historic victory, they were basically celebrities... and they needed a place where they could relax without getting mobbed.

Enter Katherine, their former opponent at said Tournament. "Why not camp out at Grandma's?" she offered.

Outside of operating hours the Little Vixen was nice and quiet—the perfect place to unwind. When the tavern was open, however, the place attracted all sorts of boisterous clientele... including some unsavory types. Now, with Liliu around, the Little Vixen had the added security of Sparring Tournament champions as on-site bodyguards. Needless to say, this proved to be an effective deterrent for belligerent drunks, sexual harassers, and other troublemakers. As a reward Tanya and the rest of her party received a discount on their bill whenever they stopped by for a meal.

"Whenever I see them eating here, I always end up ordering the same thing they're having. The way they eat it, they just make it look so tasty!" one of the regulars commented.

In other words, their presence drove sales up, too—the perfect win-win for everybody.

A delicious smell wafted out of the kitchen, accompanied by the peaceful, rhythmic sounds of chopping knives and clinking plates. In a few hours, the Little Vixen would open for business. Having finished the taste test, Tanya and Nadine occupied themselves with other tasks as they each enjoyed a cup of tea.

Then Nadine looked up from her paperwork and asked, "What are you reading, Tanya?"

“Huh? Oh, this?” Tanya lifted the hefty book to reveal the cover: *The Complete History of Pajan*.

“A history book?”

“Yeah. I wanted to do some research on Laplace... Oh, but don’t tell her, okay?”

“O-Okay! To tell the truth, I’ve been curious about her, too.”

“So tell me: when you hear the phrase ‘Laplace the Great Sorceress,’ what comes to mind?”

“Well, um...” Nadine hesitated. “According to everything I’ve read, she was known as the Wicked Dragonwhore, or the Calamity Hag. She’s depicted as a truly frightening individual, to be frank.”

Tanya pointed across the table at her. “*Exactly!* Everyone sees her as this total alpha bitch!”

“I... I wouldn’t put it like *that*, but...”

“And yet there’s so much historical evidence suggesting that Mages, Magi-Crafters, and almost *all* of our modern magic can be traced back to Laplace the Great Sorceress. The legends say she created it all herself!”

“Oh, really? And yet there aren’t that many female Mages or Magi-Crafters these days...”

“Yeah... I imagine the Imperial Magic Academy isn’t the only institution with tricks up its sleeve,” Tanya sighed.

Never in her wildest dreams would she have imagined that prospective applicants were getting points deducted from their test scores just because they were female—at least, not until a few months ago, when she and Laplace raided their boardroom to set them straight. The mere memory made her head hurt... Hopefully they’d learned their lesson.

Even the Academy, the birthplace of magical studies, had painted Laplace in the worst possible light. Her good points were all kept hush-hush, whispered from one Mage or Magi-Crafter to another, almost like a fairy tale.

“So lately I’ve been thinking...”

“Yes, Tanya?”

“I think maybe... all the legends we were told were wrong.”

She turned to the next page in her book. *With mana immeasurable, the wicked Sorceress raged all across the nation and beyond—until Maxwell the Grand Mage, savior of Pajan, sealed her away for the rest of time.*

No matter where she looked, every book, document, and record echoed a similar sentiment.

“Everything I’ve read, from 300-year-old records to this very book, claims that Laplace was an evil Sorceress who tried to destroy Ode and was sealed away as punishment at the hands of Maxwell. None of them bother to explain the specifics of who she was or what she did.”

“That sounds... kind of fishy.”

“Right? Especially since female Mages were supposedly fairly common back then.”

But now they were scarce... Was that somehow connected to Laplace’s banishment?

“All I know is... the Laplace I know is strong and brave and sweet and sometimes even kind of adorable.” Tanya closed her book with a *fwump*. “She’s just such a good person, so it makes me mad that she’s getting the villain treatment. Is that weird? Haha...”

“It’s not weird at all,” Nadine smiled. Relieved, Tanya put her book away.

*Yeah... Laplace is one of us now. If I want to know more about her, I shouldn’t dig it out of a book someone else wrote. I should just ask her directly.*

Just then—

“Oh, I can sense her nearby,” the highly perceptive former Assassin murmured to herself.

Sure enough, a beat later, the front door jingled, and in walked—er, floated—Laplace.

“Hey hey! The Great Sorceress has returned!”

“Laplace?!”

“What is it, Tanya?”

“How many times must I tell you, no floating in public?!”

“But you know I hate walking!”

“Yes, I get that, but as I’ve told you before, you can’t just flaunt high-level levitation magic in front of the entire world!”

“Oh, please. Everyone’s too entranced by my beauty to notice my—”

“Hyah!”

“Aagh!”

And so Tanya promptly tackled the Great Sorceress to the ground, then hastily scanned the dining hall for any witnesses. *Whew. Looks like no one noticed.*

“My, my, Tanya! Couldn’t wait for later tonight, could you?”

“Huh? Aaack!”

Realizing she had inadvertently positioned herself on top of Laplace, Tanya sprang off of her at the speed of light.

“This is my grandma’s restaurant! Could you guys, like, go get a room or something?!”

“It... It’s not what it looks like!!!”

Tanya blushed beet-red as Katherine peeked her head out of the kitchen. Meanwhile, Laplace giggled like a mischievous schoolgirl.

*How could someone this ordinary possibly be evil? There has to be something they’re not telling us.*

### 3

Standing in front of the Adventurers’ Guild bulletin board, Tanya stared at a single quest listing with “Expires Soon!” stamped on the front in red ink.

“Hmm... This doesn’t really *seem* like a quest...”



The vast majority of quests filed at the Guild involved monster extermination, dungeon exploration, and/or bodyguard inquiries. The better the reward on offer, the faster a given quest would get snapped up... most of the time, anyway.

“What’s the matter, Tanya?”

“Take a look at this, Laplace,” Tanya replied, pointing to the title of the expiring quest: *Fighter Needed To Oversee Negotiations And Duel On My Behalf*.

“Oh, interesting,” Nadine murmured as she peered over Laplace’s shoulder. “Sounds like an arbitration case. In all my years working at the Guild, I’ve never seen another quite like it!”

“I know, right?”

“Unfortunately, it seems quests of this sort never seem to attract many takers...”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes... Most adventurers tend to prefer... you know... *POW POW!*”

“Aagh!”

“That sort of quest, I mean.”

“I... I didn’t realize you could scream that loud,” Tanya stammered, still reeling from the ear-splitting *POW POW*. Then she paused to think. “I wonder if this quest has a story behind it...”

Who could possibly need someone to bear witness to a negotiation, and even to duel on their behalf? Tanya checked the quest description, where client information was usually listed. Apparently this one was from a 16-year-old girl. *She must be really desperate if she brought this request to the Adventurers’ Guild of all places... I’d sure like to help her out if I can.*

“Oh, but... look at this.”

“Huh?”

“There’s a level cap on this quest.”

“Oh, you’re right... Level 20-50...”

Lilium's current party members were as follows:

Tanya Artemiciov, Magi-Knight, Level 100.

Stone Cold Stunner (alias), Mage, Level 100.

Nadine Amaryllis, Healer, Level 3.

None of them were fit to accept this quest.

"Dang it..." Tanya slumped her shoulders.

"It's an awful shame," Nadine agreed.

As much as Tanya wanted to help, they couldn't very well violate the rules...  
Was there any way round it...?

Just then, she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Hey hey! Take a look at this, Tanya! Look!" Laplace exclaimed.

"Huh? The reward? I mean, I'm not too hung up on what they plan to—  
WHOA!"

"Hmm? What's the matter, ladies?"

"Get a load of this, Nadine!"

"What are you—Goodness me! C-Can it be...?!"

The three women exchanged a glance. And with that, they were all firmly in agreement. After all, the reward was simply too good to pass up: ♦REWARD: All You Can Eat Luxury BBQ♦

And Lilium was a party of lofty ideals—a party that never abandoned anyone in need— "We GOTTA take this quest!"

"We'd better take this quest, then!"

"We simply *have* to take this quest!"

—but most of all, they never turned down a good meal.

## 4

"And you want ME to take the job?!" Katherine shouted.

That afternoon found her working at the Little Vixen, decked out in a frilly apron.

“Exactly. We need you, Katherine,” Nadine insisted.

“Please, Katherine!” Tanya chimed in. “I mean, obviously the free barbecue is a delicious prospect, but more than that... the client needs our help!”

“W-Well... I don’t see how I factor into it! Like I told you, I’m on break from adventuring or whatever!”

“Please, can’t you reconsider?”

“Take it from yours truly, the Great Sorceress: you proved yourself quite capable at that Sparring Tournament!”

“Yeah! Like those little blue Fireballs, whatever they were—I wanna see that again!”

“Little blue Fireballs...? Are you talking about Foxfire? That’s a secret foxkin technique, y’know!”

“So they’re called Fox-Fireballs?! THAT’S SO COOL!!!”

“Wha...?! Quit trying to, like, butter me up or whatever!”

The three members of Lilium all gazed at Katherine, their eyes shining with admiration. Her fox ears started to twitch.

Lilium, the party who kicked ass and paid no mind to whether or not men liked them... Truth be told, the prospect of going on a quest with them was... rather enticing.

“W-Well,” Katherine mumbled, her ears twitching like crazy, “if you *absolutely* insist... I *guess* I could help you or whatever...”

“YES! Thank you, Katherine!” Nadine exclaimed, grabbing her by the hand.

“Whoa!”

“Oh, I’m delighted! Truth be told, um, I’ve always wanted to go on a quest with you!”

“I’m not doing it for *you*, okay?! I’m just kinda bored, that’s all! And I need a break from restaurant work, anyways! So I’m only joining *temporarily*, got it?!”

“We’re happy to have you, Katherine!”

“*Bienvenue à Lilium!*”

Just then, the door jingled, and a little old lady tottered inside. Katherine looked over at her and shouted, “Hi, Grandma!”

It was Tama, owner of the Little Vixen and grandmother to Katherine. She wore her white hair in a bob cut, and had large, pointy fox ears identical to Katherine’s atop her head. She wore a soft smile on her face, and though she walked with a cane, her gait was steady.

“Hello there, Kathy. I overheard the whole story.”

“Sorry, Grandma... looks like I won’t be around to help out for a while.”

“Oh, that’s alright. You have fun on your little quest, child,” Tama grinned.

“But—”

“No buts, Kathy! Do you know how happy I was when I found out you were going to be a Mage?”

Slowly but surely, she tottered over to the table and took a seat right across from Laplace, who was taking a swig from the bottle of alcohol reserved exclusively for her. “Mmm?” Laplace asked, eyes wide, her lips still pressed to the rim. At this, Tama snickered, a twinkle in her eye.

“Besides... to see my girl going on a quest with the fine ladies of Lilium, why, I couldn’t be prouder.”

“Oh, no... we’re nothing special, really...”

Tanya looked away shyly as Tama pointed her smile in her direction. It was a uniquely charming smile, after all.

“I beg to differ! With you folks around to protect the customers, we haven’t seen nearly as many fights. And better still...”

“...Yes...?”

“You eat and drink at all hours of the day and night!”

At this, Laplace grinned. “*Oui, oui.* Heh heh heh... You have a sharp eye, *madame.*”

“I’m glad to see it! I can tell you’re all good kids... especially you there.”

She pointed at Tanya, who bolted upright. “Who, me?!”

“You remind me of myself when I was younger... You carry the scent of a *very* hard worker.” Tama spoke in a slow, easygoing fashion, and her voice was rather enjoyable to listen to. Smirking, she continued, “I’ve been running my own restaurant for many, many years now, and I’m blessed to say business is doing well... but tell me, do you know what they all say about the Little Vixen?”

“That it’s been around forever?”

“Yes, and what else?”

“...That it tastes just like ‘what Mama used to make’?”

Tama nodded firmly.

The Little Vixen was known for serving authentic home cooking prepared by a beastkin woman. And given her maternal appearance, the clientele easily associated her menu with a mother’s love.

“It’s strange, working as a professional chef. Everybody seems to crave their mama’s home cooking, and yet the greatest, most respected chefs are all men.”

She had a valid point, of course. Home cooking was reserved for women, but professional cooking was somehow dominated by men. It didn’t make much sense.

“That’s why I’ve held my ground and fought for my rightful place among the other restaurants. I may be just a little old lady now, but... I wanted to be a role model for my little Kathy.”

At this, Tanya’s heart skipped a beat.

*For the next generation of little girls who will follow in our footsteps.*

Tama’s words were reminiscent of the speech she’d given at the end of the Sparring Tournament, dedicating Lilium’s victory “to all the little girls out there who dream of adventure.”

Tanya snuck a glance at Katherine, who was gazing at Tama in wide-eyed shock.



“Now Kathy, I know you like Liliu. Why, you came home *raving* about them after that tournament!”

“G-Grandma! You *promised* not to tell them about that! But... well, yeah, I did.”

“Then get going, Kathy. Make your old grandma proud.” Tama mimed a few boxing punches, and it quickly became clear that she was a great deal more agile than she let on. “You ladies can hold your own against the menfolk, I reckon?”

“Damn right!” Tanya shouted in response.

Katherine looked from Tama to Tanya and back.

“Mind you, my granddaughter here has inherited my good looks, and she’d make a great poster girl for any restaurant... but that’s just not the kind of patron I want to attract. So if they stop coming, then good riddance! And besides,” Tama grinned, “I’m the only poster girl this place needs!”

She winked at them playfully, and the whole table was in agreement: *This woman is a badass.*

“I’ll be back soon, Grandma!”

“And I’ll be here, Kathy. Oh, but... y’know, I’ve been wondering...”

The old woman looked around the table and asked—

“Which one of you is Liliu, anyhow?”

*All of us, ma’am.*

## 5

Quest time, hooray!

Today was the deadline for the “negotiations” mentioned in the quest description, and Tanya was beyond relieved that they’d made it in time. With the quest officially accepted, Liliu set off to meet with their new client—three of them in modest attire, while Katherine wore the standard armor expected of women in this country: that is to say, a bikini. And not just any bikini—a micro-

bikini.

“Hey, Katherine? Laplace Fashions can open up for business anytime. If you’re interested, I can whip you up some armor that’s stylish *and* functional!”

“N-No thanks! I look *way* more normal in the outfit I’m wearing!”

“Just because it’s *normal* doesn’t mean it’s *good*.”

“L-Look, so far, this armor’s done its job just fine, okay?! And if you think I’m jealous of your outfits, well, uh, I’m NOT! I mean it!”

“...Hey, Tanya?”

“Hmm? What’s up, Laplace?”

“I like to think I’m more educated about the modern world these days, but... is this that *tsundere* thing you were telling me about?”

“I’m not an outdated stock character, thanks!” Katherine snapped, her cheeks flushing pink.

Beside her, Nadine started giggling.

“Wh-What’s so funny, huh?!”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry! It’s just... back in adventuring school you always had such high grades, and you were one of only a few women studying magic, so you always struck me as intimidating... but now I see you’re actually rather adorable!”

“A—Ado—?!” Katherine blushed even harder, her gaze flitting to and fro in embarrassment. Ever since the Sparring Tournament, she’d grown nervous around Nadine, and with this sucker punch from out of nowhere, she had absolutely no idea how to react.

“Y-Yeah, well, flattery won’t get you anywhere with me, got it?! Now let’s go find the client’s house or whatever!”

She took off at a trot, her fox ears twitching happily atop her head.

They soon arrived at a large building located on the border between the central and western districts of Ode.

“Is this... a butcher shop...?”

This was the address the client had provided. As they stood around and stared up at it, a young girl walked out, a cute smattering of freckles across her nose, her tawny reddish-brown hair worn in two buns on either side of her head. And yet, despite her tender young age, the expression on her face was one of exhaustion.

“Hi there!” Tanya greeted her cheerfully.

The girl took one look at her and her jaw dropped. “Oh my gosh... Are you... Lilium?!”

“Oh, you’ve heard of us?”

“Duh! Oh my gosh, it’s really them... Ack! Wait! Back up!” The girl straightened herself to her full height. “I mean, um, welcome to Bianca’s Quality Meats! I’m Anca Bianca, the daughter of the house. What can I get for you today?”

“Nice to meet you, Anca! I’m Tanya Artemiciov, and today we’re here on behalf of the Adventurers’ Guild to fulfill your quest listing.”

“...Wait, what?”

“Remember? ‘Fighter Needed To Oversee Negotiations And Duel On My Behalf’?”

“No way... Someone actually took the job...?” Anca’s eyes filled with tears. “All this time, I thought... maybe my quest description was too vague... or maybe my reward just plain sucked... I didn’t think anyone would show up...”

“Heehee! Well, think again! We’re here for that luxury barbecue!”

“It’s really good meat, I promise! Well, um... come on in, everybody!” Anca pushed open a small door situated right next to the butcher shop. “The negotiation is scheduled for later tonight, but first I’d like to get you all up to speed... maybe over some tea?”

“That sounds lovely.”

And so the women of Lilium followed her inside.

Anca led them into what appeared to be her family's living room. Apparently her parents were busy running the storefront.

"You have a fiancé?"

"Yes... unfortunately," she sighed, slumping her shoulders.

And so she explained what had happened...

A few weeks ago, a tall, bony man turned up at Bianca's Quality Meats. "Uguu~ I'm Anca-bear's fiancé~!" he simpered in a nauseatingly cloying voice. Anca was disgusted. Her parents were scandalized.

"What kind of sick joke is this?" Anca asked.

The way he ogled her up and down, she knew he was the last man on earth she ever wanted to marry. But the oddest part was: she didn't recognize him at all.

"You're out of your mind. Go back to wherever you came from!" Anca declared.

But the man donned a smug, toothy grin and said:

"Don't be silly now, Anca-bear~! Why, we promised to spend the rest of our lives together just last night, remember~?"

A shiver ran down her spine.

The previous night, Anca had been out to eat with her friends. They'd made a reservation at a popular tavern months in advance, and she'd been really looking forward to it. The place was packed, and although Anca hadn't drunk any alcohol, she'd still had a lot of fun... That is, until she started feeling weirdly sleepy. After that, she'd needed a friend's help to stumble back on home.

But now this man claimed she'd promised herself to him? It didn't make sense. First of all, she didn't remember anything of the sort, and second of all, he seemed like a total creep. Confused and frightened, she started to cry.

"Well then, how about we have a formal negotiation~?" the man suggested.

“And if that doesn’t work, we’ll settle it with a duel~!”

“More than anything, I can’t stand how he ends every sentence with a tilde!” Anca shuddered.

“Yeah, I don’t think I could tolerate that, either...” To Tanya, the guy sounded like a total nightmare to talk with, much less marry. “Well, don’t worry. We’ll be right there with you for the negotiations. We could even help you think of what to say!”

“Thank you so much... To be honest, my parents are really conflicted about this. You see, um... apparently the tilde guy’s parents run a long-standing restaurant in town...”

“Yeah?”

“And they buy our meat wholesale...”

That was when Katherine piped up. “Sounds like they’re a pretty big client.”

“Yes, exactly. That’s why my parents are so scared. At one point they suggested that, maybe, I should ‘just go ahead and marry him.’”

“Oh, I don’t think so!”

Katherine rose from her chair. Then she reached out and helped Anca to her feet.

“Cheer up, buttercup. Tanya’s going to oversee the negotiations, and if it comes to it, I’ll duel on your behalf. No sweat!”

“Thank you, um...?”

“Katherine. You know the owner of the Little Vixen? I’m her grandkid.”

“Oh, yes, the Little Vixen!”

“Grandma tells me your family’s store has some of the highest-quality meat in town,” Katherine grinned.

Tanya could tell she was trying her best to reassure Anca, and truth be told, Katherine’s smile was contagious. “She’s right, Anca. Believe it or not, we’re a lot tougher than we look!”



“Heehee! Oh, I believe it, alright. Everyone’s been talking about your performance at the Sparring Tournament.” This thought, finally, made Anca smile.

Soon, the negotiations would begin.

## 7

The courtroom was located in Ode’s central district. Here, civilians could hold discussions to settle disputes. And in the event that an agreement could not be reached peaceably, a (non-fatal) duel would take place. This was also the location where formal trials were held to sentence those who infringed upon imperial law.

Anca’s circumstances were considered a civilian dispute, and thus the negotiations would be held here. She and Tanya, her chosen witness, sat together on her side of the table.

As for Anca’s parents and the rest of Liliium, they were seated in the gallery to watch the proceedings. Her parents were both grimacing; Laplace was eating popcorn.

“Yikes,” Tanya muttered as the other party walked in. The second she laid eyes on the man, she could tell he was bad news.

“Heehee~! Hi there, Anca-bear~!”

He was wearing a white tuxedo with a rose *boutonnière* affixed to his lapel. *Oh, HELL no. This ain’t your wedding, asshole!*

Anca sighed, and Tanya looked over at her to see a deeply weary expression on her face. The stress was clearly getting to her.

Then Tanya noticed something else.

“Hey, Anca?”

“Yes?”

“Uh... How old is this guy?”

“Heck if I know,” Anca spat.

The topic hadn't come up prior to now, and Tanya hadn't thought to ask, but now that she was face to face with him, he was pretty clearly— "...He's gotta be at least 40, don't you think?"

—a middle-aged creep.

## 8

Tanya was pissed.

They'd chosen to let the self-proclaimed "fiancé" speak first. This very quickly proved to be a mistake.

"I mean, you didn't say no, did you~?"

That was the first thing out of his mouth.

"Remember, back at the tavern~? I found you nodding off, and I got worried for your safety~!"

"I was nodding off?"

"That's right~! I figured you'd gotten drunk or something~!"

"That's not possible! I didn't have a single sip of alcohol that night!"

"Then I guess the medicine was too strong—ahem~!"

"Medicine?"

Tanya thought back to a conversation she'd recently overheard at a pub. Rumor had it that unsavory individuals were lacing women's drinks with some sort of drug to put them to sleep.

"N-Never mind that~! Anyway~!" The man collected himself and declared, "That was when I asked you to marry me, and you didn't say no~!"

*"Because she was ASLEEP!"* Tanya roared on reflex.

"No, no, her eyes were open~! And if she didn't say no, that means it's okay, right~?"

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!"

*The absence of a "no" means "hell yeah, go for it"?! Funny, I never got that*

*memo!*

Just then, something occurred to her. As an adventurer, she was fully capable of putting her foot down and saying no to anything she wasn't interested in. But what about girls born to nobility, or the daughters of the working class, who couldn't stand up for themselves? How many young women out there were getting forced into marriages they didn't want, all because they didn't—or couldn't—say no?

The thought made her stomach lurch.

“Besides~”

“There's more?!”

“When I went to introduce myself to her family, oh, it was so romantic~! Want me to tell you about it~?”

“Not really, but this is a formal discussion, so knock yourself out! Were it not for the laws of this land, I would slaughter you!”

“See, I started stroking Anca-bear's hair, and then she turned all red~!”

“That's because I was trying to hold in my rage!” Anca argued, her voice shaking.

“But you were looking at me with all that emotion in your eyes~!”

“That's because I... I was struggling to process what was happening!”

Her voice had escalated to a desperate scream... but Tilde Man didn't seem to care. Instead, he grinned.

“You're so cute when you're embarrassed~!” His tone was one of abject mockery. “So there you have it~! I asked Anca-bear to marry me, and she didn't say no~! What more proof do you need~?”

The next thing Tanya knew, her body was moving, she was on autopilot. She stormed right over to Tilde Man, grabbed him by the head, and squished his cheeks together with both hands.

“Bbfffph?!”

“You agree to call off the engagement, right?” Tanya asked quietly. Her hand

strength was currently boosted by Earth Magic, and in this state, she could probably crush a boulder. As such, with her iron grip smooshing his lips together, he couldn't actually respond to the question.

"Bbff... bbffphh...!"

"I'll ask you again: you agree to call off the engagement, right? And while we're at it, you agree that the results of this negotiation won't have any negative repercussions for your family's business relationship with Bianca's Quality Meats, right?!"

The only sound was that of his muffled grunting and labored breathing.

"...Good."

Tanya relinquished her grip, and the man fell to the floor.

"Wh... Who do you think you are...?!" he coughed.

"You didn't say no."

"...What?"

"When I asked you to call off the engagement, you didn't say no, correct?"

"Th... That's because I could barely talk!"

Tilde Man was now so frazzled, he'd forgotten to speak with tildes. This was the man beneath the simpering mask.

"Yeah, and? Anca here couldn't talk either—*because she was asleep!* Intentionally put to sleep, might I add! For that matter, why would a grown man want to marry an underage girl? You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"Miss Tanya...!"

Anca gazed up at her, her eyes swimming with tears. She'd never felt this way in all her life. Tanya was fuming on her behalf, and she couldn't begin to express how touched she felt that someone else would rail at the injustices done her.

Meanwhile, the man glared at Tanya. "Rrrrgghh... I... I refuse to accept this! I demand a duel between my representative and yours!"

"Gladly," Tanya responded with a smile.

Tilde Man's "representative" turned out to be a skinhead with a ripped physique, polar opposite to his opponent, Katherine, in every way.

"This is my big chance to shine, and I'm *not* going down this time," she muttered to herself.

Just then, there was a loud *snap* directly behind her.

"Huh?"

The next instant, her skimpy "standard Mage girl" bikini began to transform.

Long white sleeves. A bright red *hakama* skirt. Slits running up the sides, exposing the tight-fitting compression shorts worn beneath.

"No way... Is this—?!"

"Traditional foxkin shrine maiden's garb? You bet it is! Your *grand-mère* showed it to me before we left!" Laplace called out in a singsong voice.

"Oh, wow... Katherine, you look so impressive!" Nadine gushed, her eyes sparkling.

"Heh heh... Interesting. Looks like someone's got good taste."

Katherine tightened her grip on her magic staff. She could feel Anca's desperate, pleading gaze boring into the back of her head as Tanya embraced her protectively. *Come to think of it, this is the first time I've ever fought to protect someone*, she mused to herself.

She scrutinized her opponent. Judging from his armor, he was probably a Brawler. And if his punches were faster than her spells, she wouldn't stand a chance against him.

"Hey, lady. You really think a little costume change is going to help you?"

"Nope. But that's okay... because I don't need any help taking you down!"

Somehow, in standing up to defend someone else's honor, Katherine felt stronger than ever. And if it wasn't for Liliun, perhaps this was a feeling she would never have discovered by herself.

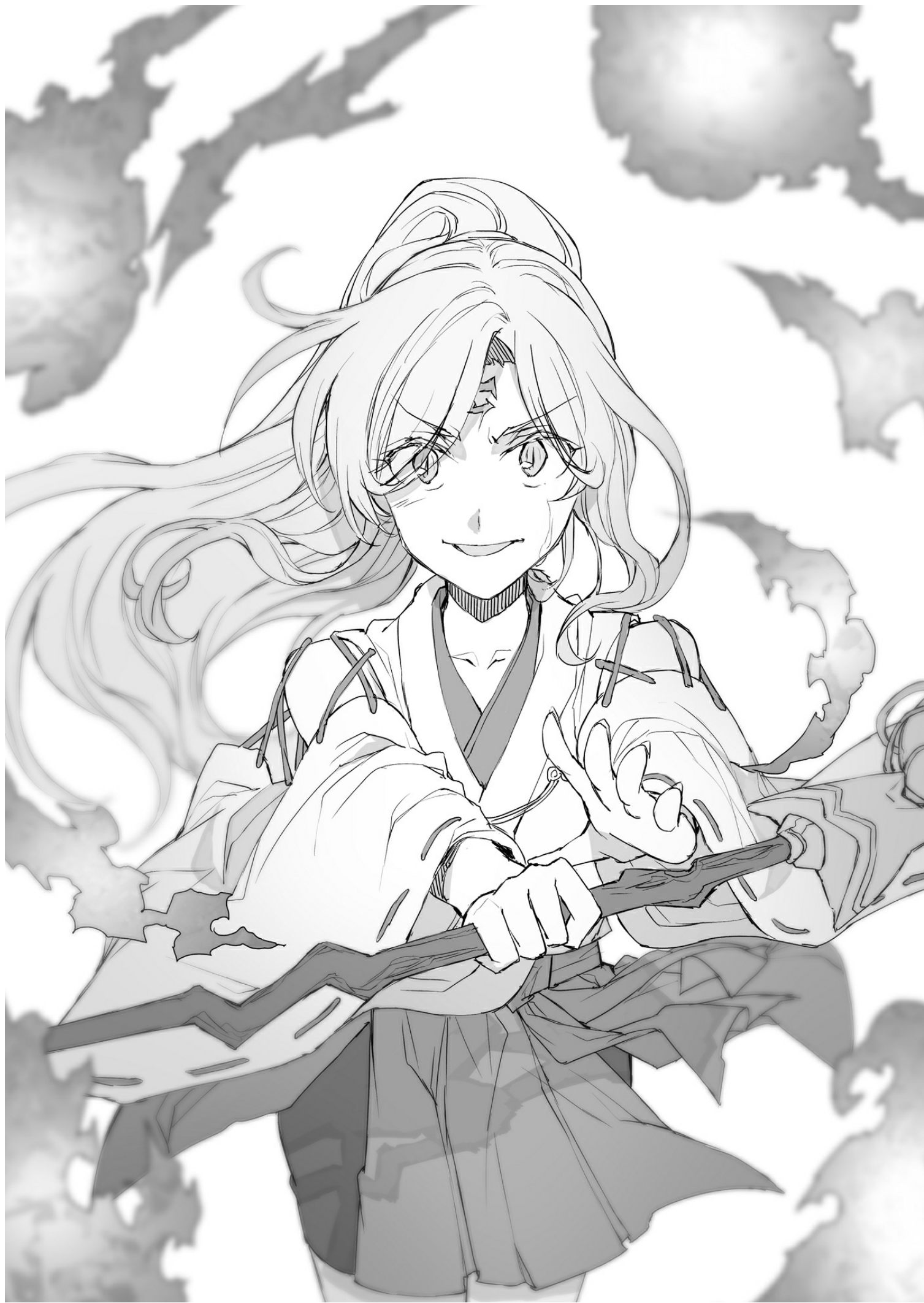
She took a deep breath.

“Round and round the wheel turns! Hellfire, I summon thee! Heed my call—  
AND GIVE CHASE! **Fox-Fireball!!!!**”

Dozens upon dozens of pale blue fireballs descended upon the Brawler.

“GYAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!”





“Holy cow!” Anca gasped.

Tilde Man sputtered and stammered in disbelief as his representative hit the floor like a ton of bricks.

Laplace put a finger to her cheek and tilted her head. “Wait a moment... Did she just formally adopt Tanya’s nickname for her spell?”

“Gah! Look, it was just easier to call it that, okay?!” Katherine snapped, turning away in a huff... but it was obvious to everyone watching that she was trying to conceal her embarrassment.

Katherine Foxxi: a woman possessed of a will strong enough to rival even Tanya’s. Her heart was in the right place—she was just a little awkward at expressing herself.

Okay, more like *really* awkward, but still.

## **10**

And so the dispute was “resolved” (physically) in Anca’s favor. Soon afterwards, the owners of Bistro Flora—Tilde Man’s parents—came over to apologize to Anca directly. Apparently this was far from the first time their son had sparked an incident like this. In response, Anca told them: “I don’t know if I’ll forgive him, but I want him to promise he’ll never try anything like this ever again.”

(As a side note, Tilde Man’s parents also assured her that they were devoted to her family’s meat products and had no plans on ending their business relationship anytime soon.)

Back at the butcher shop, the sweet smell of juicy grade-A meat filled the air as the members of Lilium were treated to their promised reward.

“Ooh, it looks so good...!”

“I didn’t realize you were looking forward to this, Katherine.”

“I’m just, y’know, checking to make sure our main supplier is up to snuff! The Little Vixen prides itself on offering its customers the highest quality meals at

affordable prices—oh man, look at that grease sizzle!”

“Enough about the meat—this wine is *fantastique*!”

The ladies of Liliu sat around the grill, their eyes shining with excitement. Likewise, Anca had a big smile on her face as she cooked each piece to perfection. With the fiancé debacle safely behind her, there was clearly a huge weight off her shoulders.

“Mmmm, I really like this kind! What’s it called, anyway? Hanger steak? From the diaphragm? Wait, but... isn’t that an organ?!”

“Can I get a refill of that wine, *s’il vous plaît*?”

“Oh my goodness... This chicken is so crispy on the outside, yet so juicy on the inside! I can hardly believe it! Ack, now my glasses are all fogged up!”

“This sauce is the real deal! You can tell the meat was marinated perfectly, too.”

These women were in barbecue heaven.

“Hey, Tanya! The meat’s burning!”

“Perfect timing! Let me grab that for you, Laplace! Aahh, this beer really hits the spot!!!”

“Mmmm... Yep, that’s the taste of Bianca’s Quality Meats, alright! Grandma sure knows how to pick ‘em!”

“I have to agree... Gah! The grease from this delicious, crispy sausage has splattered all over my new lens!”

Their hunger was unending. And because this feast was held right there in the butcher shop, customers started buying products left and right. Anca’s parents were both pleased as punch.

Later, during dessert...

“Just so we’re clear, Anca... you’re not totally innocent in this,” Anca’s father declared after a pause.

“What?” Anca froze. He was blaming her for what happened? Unbelievable. She hadn’t done anything wrong!!

“You were walking around late at night, wearing that hoochie outfit! What did you think would happen? You should’ve been more careful.”

“Wh... *Hoochie outfit*?! I just wanted to dress up nice for my friends! And besides... how was I supposed to know someone would spike my drink?!”

“Clearly you weren’t paying attention. In light of Liliu’s generosity, I’ll let you off the hook... but from now on, you’ll have a strict curfew. In fact, I’m tempted to say you’re grounded!”

“What? No!”

“I’m worried about you, Anca! You’re my daughter, and you’ll do as I say!”

This was too much for Tanya to tolerate. But before she could get to her feet —

“HEY!”

—a sharp voice cut across the table. She turned to look.

“I don’t appreciate that. Not one bit!”

It was Laplace.

“D-Do you mind?! I’m trying to parent my daughter here!”

“*Silence*,” she growled in a low, icy voice. “She automatically owes you her obedience because you’re her father? If that’s supposed to be a joke, it isn’t funny.”

Normally Laplace was an easygoing sort who never let anything get under her skin... but all good humor had left her voice.

“Your daughter isn’t your property, *compris*?”

Silence.

Tanya was too shocked to speak. *I’ve never seen Laplace this angry... She’s practically livid.*

Meanwhile, Anca’s father looked back at Laplace in surprise. Then, steadily, his expression shifted to one of guilt. “Um... I’m sorry, Anca. I was too hard on you.”

“Glad to hear it.” Laplace smiled brightly. “Now then, this Great Sorceress needs another drink!”

Before they knew it, she had returned to her usual carefree self.

Incidentally, Bianca’s Quality Meats would go on to receive an outpouring of orders requesting “that meat those girls were gushing over in your store”... but that’s a story for another time.

As it turned out, Liliu was good for the economy.

## Chapter 3: Invited To A Party (Not That Kind, The Other Kind)

### 1

Tanya stared down at the letter passed on to her from the Adventurers' Guild. Laplace looked over her shoulder at the contents, then let out a low whistle.

"Now what's this about? Some kind of party, hmm?"

"Oh, hi, Laplace. Yeah, it looks like we've been invited to the royal soirée at the castle. They're holding a dance party in recognition of Ode's most hardworking constituents."

"Hmmm, I see. So it's a 'wine and dine' sort of party."

"Right."

"Not the 'POW POW' sort of party."

"Correct—although it says here they'd like us to provide additional security in addition to attending as guests."

The royal soirée was one of the most important annual events in all of Pajan—and Liliun was invited.

"Oho, interesting. We're small-time celebrities now that we've won the Sparring Tournament, eh?" Laplace joked. "In that case, just leave it to your trusty Great Sorceress! I'll whip us up some fabulous evening wear!"

"Yes, please! That would be wonderful! Ooh, I'm kind of nervous about attending..."

"Really? *I'm* not nervous at all! Oh, but..."

"But what?"

There was a brief pause as Laplace's expression shifted ever so slightly, taking on the barest hint of melancholy.



“Will that incompetent third-rate Court Grand Mage be there, do you think? Maxwell, or whatever his name is?”

The implication behind this question wasn't lost on Tanya... which is why she decided to hold back, just a tiny bit.

It would have been so easy to say “What's wrong?” or “You know you can talk to me about it, right?”

But something made her hesitate.

So instead, she changed the subject.

“...I wonder what color my dress should be.”

After a discussion at the Little Vixen, it was decided that only Tanya and Laplace would attend the soirée.

“Neither of you are going?! Why not?!” Tanya demanded.

Katherine snickered. “Well, the thing about the royal soirée is... the party isn't limited to just the castle, y'know!”

“What do you mean?”

“Every year, for that night only, they open the castle grounds to the public and hold an outdoor festival. That way all the uninvited, regular folks can still get in on the fun, y'know? It's a time-honored tradition or whatever!”

“Wow, really? But... I mean, we *were* invited, so...”

Katherine's smirk deepened. “Yeah, but the outdoor festival is where they put all the food stands!”

“Food stands...? Wait... You mean...?!”

“Yep! The Little Vixen's going mobile, baby!”

Nadine nodded. “And I promised Katherine I would help her run the stand.”

“Oh, I had no idea!”

“Yep. We're gonna sell those chicken bites and potato wedges you two taste-tested. Plus some ice-cold beer!”

“Man, that sounds great!”

“I’ve always wanted to try my hand at cooking, so I’m really looking forward to it!” Nadine beamed.

“Yeah? Well then, I guess we’ll be splitting up. Have lots of fun out there for us!”

“Will do! The plan’s to make a killing in sales, heh heh!” Katherine held up two fingers in a peace sign.

Nadine shyly followed suit. “You can count on me!”

Her smile was as radiant as the sun itself.

## 2

And so the big day rolled around at last.

Tanya looked around, her eyes sparkling with excitement. This was her first time at Ode Castle, and it was *beautiful*. No, really—they had chandeliers and everything.

Laplace was in equally high spirits. She had added an extra layer of embroidery to her usual black dress, and she was looking gorgeous.

“*Très bon!* You look simply ravishing, Tanya!”

“You really think so?”

In place of her usual armor, Tanya was wearing a fanciful evening gown. It was bright red in color, and the skirt was styled to look like a rose in bloom. As for her footwear— “...Um, Laplace...”

“What is it, Tanya?”

“These shoes really make my feet hurt!”

She was wearing a pair of stiletto heels.

“Do they? My feet never hurt because I float all the time.”

“Rrgh... If only I could use levitation magic...”

“Want me to cast it on you?”

“Oh, um...”

Before she could decide, however, someone called out to them from behind. They turned to find a man wearing a perfectly pressed suit—probably one of the castle attendants. He looked to be the very picture of a butler, although his official title was surely more impressive.

“Terribly sorry to interrupt your conversation,” the butler began, wearing a perfunctory smile, “but we cannot permit any oversized weapons within the castle.”

“Hmm?”

“Oh!”

Indeed, in sharp contrast to her flowery dress, Tanya was wearing the Not-Excalibur on her back, just like always.

“You’re from... Lilium, is it?” the butler asked as he checked their invitation.

“Yes, that’s right. The letter requested our services as a security measure, which is why I brought my sword.”

“Be that as it may... could you be more discreet with it in some fashion? After all, it clashes so terribly with your resplendent gown.”

At this, Tanya glanced around. There were a handful of other guests wearing swords with their fashionable attire, likely for the same reason Tanya had brought hers. But those guests— “They’re all men!”

In other words: they weren’t wearing gowns. They were wearing clothes and shoes that were made with comfort in mind, and naturally, their swords didn’t clash much at all. After all, their outfits were designed for that purpose.

“So *they’re* allowed to have their swords out, but I’m not? We were all invited for the same reason!”

“I’m afraid it goes against our dress code to wear a gown and a sword at the same time.”

The butler refused to concede a single inch.

*Oh well. I guess I’ll just have to—What am I THINKING?*

“I promised myself I’d stop shrugging my shoulders at this stuff,” Tanya muttered as the butler wordlessly walked away. “Hey, Laplace?”

“What is it, Tanya?”

“Can you make these clothes really badass?!”

Laplace put a finger to her cheek in contemplation...

### 3

Meanwhile, outside the castle: people, people, people, as far as the eye could see!

The outdoor festival had drawn a massive crowd of commoners, and spirits were high. Food stands were in rows packed tight as sardines and illuminated by paper lanterns. Everywhere you looked, visitors were singing and dancing and eating and drinking to their hearts’ content.

One stand in particular was decorated with two big signs that read: *Everybody’s Favorite, The Little Vixen!* and *Lilium-Approved!*

“Here we go! Time to rake in the cash or whatever!” Katherine declared, hands on her hips.

She was wearing a white button-down shirt with a black tie and a waist apron, her polished leather shoes gleaming in the lantern light. It was a simple, classy look that won murmurs of approval from everyone who passed by. Beside her, Nadine stood wearing the exact same uniform; their athletic physiques only served to further enhance the overall aesthetic.

“Wow! You look so awesome!”

“Heh heh heh! Darn right I do! But... thanks. Fried chicken bites! Get your fried chicken bites!”

With the help of their speedy, efficient service, the chicken bites and potato wedges (not to mention that ice-cold beer) sold like crazy. As Katherine ran the register, Nadine deftly plated each order.

“Hey, you’re pretty good at this! Seems like you know exactly how much to

serve, and you've got all the prep work covered, too. You *sure* you've never cooked before?" Katherine asked.

"Honest, I haven't. You see, um... my fingers..."

"Huh?"

"This was a long, long time ago, but... back when I used to help with the family business, I worked with a lot of poisonous plants every day."

"Making poison tinctures, or what?"

"Yes, that sort of thing. Because of that, my hands were... tainted. Try as I might, I could never completely eliminate the toxic chemicals from my fingertips, so... if I tried to cook something, I would inevitably poison whatever food I made."

Slowly, hesitantly, Nadine laid bare a tiny fragment of her past.

"Oh, gotcha. So that's why you've always avoided cooking."

"Yes, exactly... Sorry for being such a downer."

"Nah, it's fine. So what if you're inexperienced? You can just learn as you go!"

"...Huh?"

"Like I said, your prep work's really good! And we need to start frying up a new batch, so... wanna give it a try?"

"B-But—"

"Don't worry. I'm right here to help you. Besides, you remember what my best spell is?"

"Oh, um... The special Fireball?"

"Yep, Fox-Fireball! And the key to good cooking is heat control!"

As she spoke, Katherine slid the raw chicken into the oil, where it began to crackle and pop—proof that it was heated to the perfect temperature.

Just then, a scream rang out in the crowd. Nadine looked over and spotted a young girl sitting on the ground like she'd been knocked backwards. Next to her stood a man with a large build.

“He... He touched my butt!” the girl shouted in a quavering voice.

“Whoops! Sorry! My hand slipped!” the man replied without a hint of remorse.

“What?”

“These crowds are really cramped, you feel me? It was bound to happen! If you don’t want people touching you, you’d better learn to protect yourself!” he laughed.

“Wh... Wha...” The young girl was so baffled, she could scarcely speak. All the color had drained from her face.

“Poor thing,” Nadine whispered, biting her lip.

The man’s size was intimidating, and no one dared to pick a fight with him...

“Sorry, Katherine, but we’ll have to put this cooking lesson on the back-burner!”

And with that, Nadine dashed over to the girl.

“Are you alright, miss?”

“Th-Thank you... I’m sorry for... being a buzzkill...”

“You have nothing to apologize for. You did nothing wrong.”

But then Nadine heard whispering from the crowd around them: “Why would she come here when she knew the place would be packed?”

“If she hates crowds that much, she could’ve just waited until later.”

“I mean, if her personal bubble’s so big, then what’s she doing at a festival, anyway?”

“She’s probably lying for attention. I feel bad for that guy!”

It was awful. She’d only come here to enjoy the festival like everyone else... and now they’d decided this meant she was to blame? Nadine glared around at the individuals who had voiced their “concerns.”

“Eeek!” one of them shrieked. Intimidated by her “I will end you” vibes, they all fell silent.

Then she put a protective arm around the young girl's shoulders and helped her to her feet. Meanwhile, the large man seemed to ignore all this. Instead, he strolled over to a nearby food stall—the Little Vixen, to be specific.

“Hey you! Gimme a beer! And what's with that getup, fox lady? If you're selling beer, you gotta wear a swimsuit! Where's the bikini?” he demanded, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Excuse me? What's your problem, old man?” Katherine snapped back.

But the man didn't seem to care about her reaction. Because of his intimidating stature, no one ever criticized him and he didn't have to worry about other people's feelings.

“Who says I gotta wear a bikini, huh? What's wrong with my apron?”

“Beer and swimsuits go together! If you wanna sell beer, you need a bikini, babe!”

“No, we don't, actually!”

“Now, now, Katherine,” Nadine scolded as she returned to the stand, young girl in tow. The girl in question was biting her lip and refusing to look in the man's direction; Nadine moved in front of her, shielding her. “One beer, coming right up,” she declared in a cold, emotionless voice. Then she turned back to the girl. “As for you, young lady, why don't you sit here in our food stand and take a minute to collect yourself?”

*Why's she just going along with this?* Katherine wondered. Then she looked down into the fryer. Her chicken bites had exceeded foxy orange and were now turning a deep brown. Any longer and they'd burn.

Turning away from the man, she quickly lifted the chicken out of the oil. And the moment her back was turned— “Aagh!”

—the man let out a yelp.

She whirled around to find Nadine standing beside him, holding the beer he'd ordered. But as for the man himself, his clothes—save for his underpants—were now lying in shreds at his ankles.

This explained why Nadine was quietly tucking a dagger back into her pocket.



“Beer and swimsuits go together, correct?”

“You bitch! You think you can do this to me?!”

“Maybe you’d better learn to protect yourself,” Nadine whispered coldly, her voice soft but unwavering. Somehow, it seemed to echo across the entire castle grounds.

There was a moment of silence. The young girl held her breath. And then—  
“...Pfft...”

Someone in the crowd let out a tiny snicker... and this sparked a wave of laughter all around them, particularly from the women in the vicinity who had witnessed the man’s domineering attitude.

All at once, a line had formed at the Little Vixen. And so, ignoring the man’s furious yapping, the two ladies of Liliu went back to work. In the end, their food stand was a complete success.

## 4

Meanwhile, inside the castle...

“So basically, all we need to do is make it so the sword doesn’t clash with the dress, correct?”

“Well, yeah... but that guy made it sound like dresses and swords can’t go together at all. That’s why I was thinking maybe I should wear something with pants, or...”

“*Non, non!* Heh heh heh... I would advise you not to underestimate the Great Sorceress!”

Laplace jauntily snapped her fingers, and the Not-Excalibur floated up into the air.

“Oh!”

Then, as the Great Sorceress raised her hands, it began to change form, almost as though she were sculpting it herself. The giant sword shrank and shrank until it disappeared into Laplace’s closed fist.

“Now then, give me your hand.”

“My hand...?” Despite her confusion, Tanya did as she asked.

“Here you are, Tanya. I have crafted you the ultimate accessory.”

Laplace bent down on one knee, her skirt pooling onto the floor, and gently took Tanya’s hand in hers. Then she slipped a golden ring onto her finger.

“Wh-What the?! Wait... Laplace... Is this...?!”



“Hee hee hee! What do you think? Do you like it?” Laplace grinned. “If not, I can turn it into a bracelet, a tiara, whatever you desire.”

“But—”

“Not to worry, not to worry! Admittedly this sort of craftwork is just a hobby of mine, but rest assured, I can guarantee its quality. This ring will transform back into a sword by reading your mana circuits. Not that it really matters if the sword ‘clashes’ with your dress, but... well, I just thought a ring would look nice on you, that’s all.”

“No one’s ever given me a ring before...”

“Well then, you’re quite the lucky girl to get a custom Laplace ring as your first! Actually... no, maybe you’ve earned it. Either way, I hope you’ll accept it as a token of my affection.”

Laplace shot her a playful wink, and all at once, her chest filled with emotion. This was a sincerely touching gift.

“D-Does it look good on me, though?”

*“Oui, oui. C’est magnifique!”*

With a small smile, Laplace donned a stylish masquerade mask to conceal her face. At last, the two women were ready to join the soirée.

Hand in hand, they strolled through the castle. And as they drew the attention of all those nearby, they were referred to in hushed whispers as “the Red Rose and the Black Rose.”

One hour later...

“Owww...” Tanya plunked herself down on the balcony floor.

“Are you alright, Tanya?”

“These stilettos... I don’t think human beings were meant to wear these... They’re not shoes, they’re some kind of torture device! I’m gonna kill whoever invented these!”

“Is it really that bad?!”

“YES!”

“Oh, you poor thing... I know you were just trying to be a good security guard, but you didn’t have to patrol the entire castle!”

“Nnnn... I’m gonna have a fat blister, I just know it...”

The cool night air felt good against her skin. She was having fun wearing a fancy dress for a change, and she didn’t exactly hate the *idea* of high heels, but... they simply weren’t ideal footwear for a security guard in the least. *And why do these guests all love to stand around talking for hours and hours?!*

Thus, she and Laplace had slipped outside for a breather.

“Heh heh heh! The Great Sorceress always knows how to make the best out of any given situation!”

As they were leaving the Great Hall, Laplace had swung by the buffet table to grab some juicy roast beef, sweet and airy chiffon cake, and a bunch of different appetizers—not to mention a bottle of pricey red wine. She laid it all out on the balcony like a midnight picnic, and they shared a toast under the moonlight. The dull ache of her feet was easily outmatched by the splendor of the feast before them.

Just then, as she was resting with her shoes off... a small figure appeared behind them.

“...What?! Lady Stone Cold Stunner?!”

“Mmffgghh?!” Tanya started to choke on her wine. Someone had just called Laplace by her infamously jokey alias... She turned in the direction of the voice

—

“Oh my! And Lady Tanya?!”

“Huh?!” The intruder had named her as well. Tanya blinked. *Who IS that?*

“Is this real life...? Oh my goodness! Can I get your autographs?!”

Standing there was a young girl with silver hair, violet eyes, and a long dress that trailed along behind her.

*Crap!*

Tanya hadn't anticipated that anyone else would step out onto the balcony with them, since the door was concealed with curtains and carefully arranged furniture. *Oh god, they're gonna yell at us...* She was desperate to resolve the situation without causing a scene.

"Shhh! Keep your voice down, little girl!"

"Huh? Oh... Okay..." She clapped both hands to her mouth and nodded fervently, eyes wide.

Fortunately, no one seemed to have heard them. It didn't sound like anyone was coming to investigate, anyway. Tanya breathed a sigh of relief.

Then Laplace's gaze drifted over the girl's dress. It was clearly made with only the highest-quality silk... and there was a familiar flower emblem expertly embroidered onto it.

"It can't be..."

"Huh?"

"This little girl is the Emperor's daughter. In other words... she's the Crown Princess."

"*What?!*"

The color drained from Tanya's face. This girl was a member of the esteemed Aweigkorrt royal family—the rulers of Pajan? Admittedly the quality of her clothes *did* suggest she was someone of importance...

"...Yes, that's right. I am Arianora Aweigkorrt, Crown Princess."

"I thought so. See, you've got the imperial flower crest stitched onto your dress there. Only a member of the royal family can put it right on their clothes."

"But the commoners aren't supposed to know about our family insignia... Lady Stone Cold Stunner, you never cease to amaze me!"

"Heh heh! The Great Sorceress sees it alllll," Laplace replied in a singsong voice.

Meanwhile, in sharp contrast to her levity, Tanya was as white as a sheet. "Are you serious...?"

She put a hand over her mouth. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine she'd encounter the *princess* of all people.

Here they were, talking to a member of the royal family, and Laplace hadn't batted a lash. Evidently the confidence of a 300-year-old Sorceress was not to be taken lightly.

Then Tanya noticed something.

"Wait, but... Forgive me, um... Your Highness?"

"Yes?" Princess Arianora asked, tilting her head elegantly.

"If I may ask... how do you know of us?"

Admittedly, it was a rather blunt question.

"Look out, world! Tanya's famous now!" Laplace joked.

"Stop! This isn't funny, okay?! I'm terribly sorry, Your Highness!"

"Listen, um... please, call me Arianora. You all performed so wonderfully at the Sparring Tournament this year... It was the most fun I've ever had attending an event in an official capacity!"

Her expression was so dreamy, she was practically swooning, and Tanya couldn't help but smile. Princess or not, at the end of the day, Arianora was still a young girl. And that was precisely the demographic Tanya had hoped to reach.

"So tell me, um, do you have any funny stories from the Sparring Tournament? Or... Or your other adventures?!" Arianora asked excitedly.

"Meeting the members of Lilium is simply a dream come true!"

Her eyes sparkled with the energy of a girl who dreamed of adventure. But just then—she fell into a coughing fit.

"Whoa, whoa, you okay?!" Tanya dashed over in spite of her aching feet. "Oh no, you're really pale... We need to call for a Healer!"

"No, Lady Tanya! I, um... I'm okay. It's just... My corset is rather tight around the midsection. That's why I came out here in the first place... I just need to rest and get some air, and then I'll be fine."

"You sure don't *look* fine!"



Her luxurious dress was visibly squeezing her like a vise, and Tanya couldn't stand to see it.

"Please, don't call for anyone," Arianora wheezed in a tiny voice.

So instead, Tanya did everything she could to loosen her little dress.

The princess heaved a sigh of relief.

## 5

"...And then what happened?!" Arianora asked gleefully.

"You should've seen it! Stone Cold Stunner got *completely* carried away."

"*Excusez-moi?* Only because *you* were behaving recklessly in the first place!"

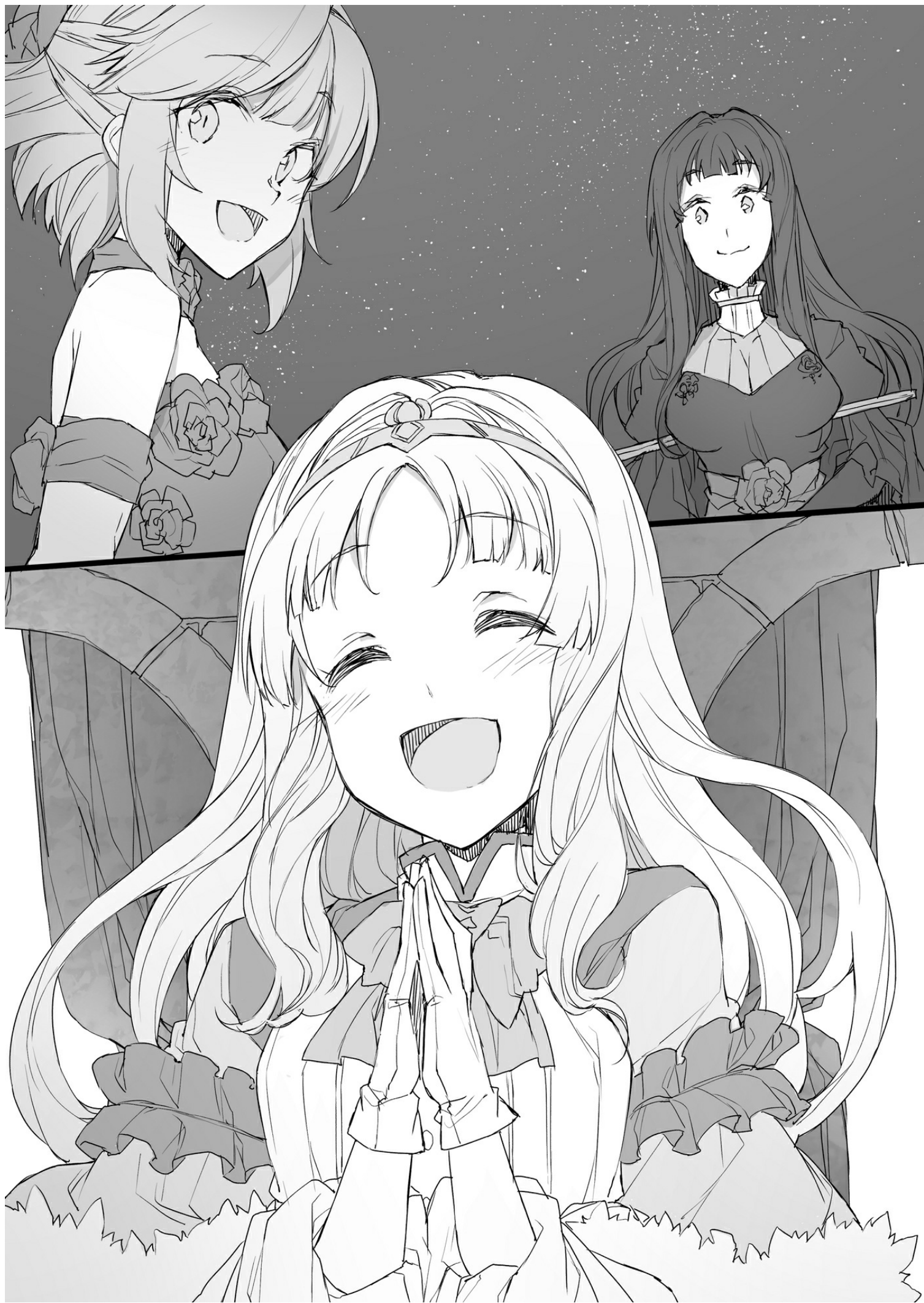
As they recounted the various jobs Liliu had undertaken, Arianora listened rapturously, her eyes gleaming. Her title of Princess had originally thrown Tanya for a loop, but now she could see that Her Highness was no different from any other girl.

Arianora Aweigkorrt, the Crown Princess of Pajan. The Emperor and Empress had been childless for many, many years until Arianora was born thirteen summers prior. At the time Tanya was still a child, living in a rural region far to the north, but even she could remember the joy and festivity that followed the birth of the princess.

Likewise, she also remembered the years and years' worth of cruel comments people had made about the Empress, who hailed from another country. At the time, young Tanya was flabbergasted that they would refer to such a beautiful and wise woman as a "barren hag" just because she hadn't produced any children.

But now that baby princess had grown up into a precious little girl! For some reason, Tanya couldn't help but feel sentimental; *if only Her Majesty could see her now*, she thought. But the Empress had died a few years prior in a carriage crash on her way to a distant region.

Tanya could only imagine how Arianora must have felt, living each day without her mother... *I hope the world never takes your smile away.*



“Whew... I feel much better now. Thank you.”

After a long chat, Arianora finally got to her feet, and Tanya followed suit—  
“Aaagh!”

“Oh heavens! Are you alright, Lady Tanya?!”

“Y-Yeah, I’m okay! My feet hurt, that’s all.”

They were so blistered, they looked like they might start bleeding at any moment. In other words, they hurt like hell. Nothing she couldn’t tolerate, of course, but more than that, she didn’t want to worry anyone, least of all a child half her age.

Just then, she heard a snap—

“Well now, Tanya, perhaps it’s about time for a costume change!”

“What? You’re going to change my—*whoa!*”

“Wow! This... This is *incredible!*”

Arianora gasped in awe. Mana flowed from Laplace like a gentle breeze as Tanya’s rosy dress transformed into a gallant white tailcoat with leather shoes.

“Oh, I’m just getting started!”

“Uh, Lap—I mean, Stone Cold Stunner?!”

Snap, snap, snap. Her tailcoat turned into a jaunty tuxedo-style dress, then a blue military uniform, then an exotic traditional Court Mage robe. Each of them were flattering in their own ways, but most notable of all— “Rrrgh... The footwear is so comfortable, I wanna punch something!!!”

She balled her hands into fists. Each of the outfits was designed to be paired with combat boots for maximum comfort.

In the end, Laplace settled on the white tailcoat, fashioning it into a dress. Amazingly enough, the shoes she’d chosen to go with this outfit were both aesthetically beautiful *and* so comfortable they were practically made for Tanya’s feet. As a result, the pain had faded considerably. *I guess nothing’s impossible for a Great Sorceress.*

“How did you like that little fashion show I put on?” Laplace smirked playfully. “Actually... on second thought, that was inconsiderate of me. How about it, little princess? Care to try on one of Stone Cold Stunner’s latest custom designs?”

“Huh? Me?! Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly...”

“The lady doth protest too much! You have jealousy written all over your face!” Laplace grinned.

After a moment, Arianora looked up, determination burning in her eyes. “O-Okay then... I want to wear something gallant, too! Something I can breathe in!”

“*Très bien!* Leave it to me!”

But right before she snapped her fingers—a deep, icy voice echoed across the balcony.

“Princess Arianora, what on earth are you doing out here?”

## 6

Arianora’s face froze. All emotion melted away until nothing remained but a blank slate. Then she silently got to her feet and retreated behind the man who had joined them on the balcony.

“As your assigned babysitter, I must say, I am less than pleased.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

The man was wearing an elaborate mask, befitting of a royal soirée. A handful of male attendants stood just behind him.

At his insistence, Arianora left the balcony, shooting Tanya and Laplace just one final parting glance before she disappeared. The masked man followed after her, taking large, self-important strides, almost like he was monitoring the Princess’s every move.

Panicked, one of the attendants called after him— “Wait! Lord Maxwell!”

It was a name both Tanya and Laplace recognized—a name they were all too

familiar with.

This was Maxwell, the man who was said to have achieved immortality, who had served as the Court Grand Mage of Pajan for the past 300 years.

Beside her, Tanya felt Laplace's cheer and warmth turn to stone.

"Wait, so that was—uh, Laplace, are you—?"

Tanya stopped short and inhaled sharply.

"Max...well...?"

Laplace stared into space, cold, distant, unseeing.

Almost like she was a different person altogether.

Tanya couldn't remember much of what happened after that. All she remembered was feeling like Laplace might up and vanish the second she took her eyes off her—so she held Laplace's hand all night long, the golden ring gleaming on her finger.

But the very next morning, Laplace the Great Sorceress had disappeared.

## Chapter 4: A High Five In The Dungeons

### 1

*Lately I've been thinking about those distant days 300 years ago, when the Empire of Pajan was devastated by war. Those were the days in which I lived as a Sorceress... no, as a weapon.*

*My father was the Court Grand Mage; my mother was a shrine maiden from the Temple of the Dragon God. Born with an immense capacity for mana, I had a very sheltered upbringing to the point that I never needed to walk on my own two feet. Day and night, I was trained in magic and nothing else.*

*I would act as a weapon that could wield powerful spells with a mere snap of my fingers—that was my father's vision for me. And when I set foot on the battlefield, I destroyed many things. Buildings. Armies.*

*The people of Pajan hailed me as the Great Sorceress. Hostile nations cursed me as the Wicked Dragonwhore. But I paid them no mind. The more I destroyed—the more lives I took—the happier it made him.*

*I was his puppet. Why? Because I didn't know any other way to live.*

*But now, 300 years later, I see things a little differently.*

*If only I'd said no... if only I'd stood up for myself... maybe I could have changed my fate. Maybe the women of this country wouldn't have been tricked into walking around debasing themselves for no reason.*

*But perhaps it's not too late to try again. Perhaps it's time I did something for myself... and get revenge like Tanya did.*

### 2

The sun was setting, and the Little Vixen had just opened for business. Tanya and Nadine sat at their usual table, slumped over in defeat.

“What’s wrong? Still can’t find her?” Katherine asked as she served them each a cold glass of milk. Lately she’d really come into her own as part-time manager.

“I’m afraid not... and the only worthwhile lead we have is that someone has been stealing those orichalcum coins from every magic supply store in town,” Nadine explained.

“And you’re saying that ‘someone’ is Laplace?”

“We can’t say for sure, but... well... they’re known as *Laplace’s* Orichalcum Coins, after all... and she did seem awfully interested in them.”

The two of them had gone to each affected store to ask for details, but every last one of them described the theft thusly: “One minute it was there, and the next it was just gone.” Most of them kept their coins in a vault imbued with protective charms... and yet the thief broke through without a struggle. This was a considerable feat that few could hope to accomplish, hence they were convinced it was almost certainly Laplace’s doing. But if so... why steal them?

After a long period of silence, Tanya sighed heavily. “What’s gotten into her...?”

“Eh, I’m sure she’ll be back before you know it.”

“I don’t know... You’d think she would’ve given me a heads-up first...”

Three days had passed since Laplace’s shocking disappearance, and Tanya was growing more anxious than ever. Recently she’d sensed that something was bothering Laplace—it had been written all over her face. But she’d never imagined Laplace would vanish without a word.

“Yeah, but... I mean, you guys first met completely by chance, right? And it’s not like she signed a contract to work for you, right?” Katherine asked, averting her gaze awkwardly.

At this, Tanya slumped further onto the table.

“Katherine!” Nadine scolded.

*She’s right, though,* Tanya thought to herself. *Maybe she’s gone forever...*

Just then, a bell jingled loudly as the door to the Little Vixen swung open. Hopeful, Tanya looked over—and found a middle-aged man standing there. /

*keep getting my hopes up.* She glanced away again.

“Busy, busy, busy! Good heavens, am I ever busy!” the man declared to no one in particular. He was chubby, but well-dressed, and his voice carried across the restaurant.

While the Little Vixen was popular with commoners, aristocrats with discerning palates were known to stop in for incognito visits. Clearly this man was one of them. *Seriously, he’s not even trying to disguise it at all.*

“Welcome!”

Katherine walked over to him, carrying a menu. The man scrutinized her for a moment.

“Hmph,” he snorted. “Are you new here? Where’s the owner?”

“Grandma took the day off. She’s not as young as she used to be, y’know. So I’m running the store today.”

“Oho, so this is her granddaughter? Now that’s a surprise. You’re quite the looker!”

“...Can I take your order?” Katherine asked, ignoring his inappropriate comments and handing him the menu. Meanwhile, she imagined herself roasting him alive with her custom Fox-Fireballs. Not that anyone would want to eat him.

“I’ll have the usual.”

“...The what?”

“The usual! Tell the chef that Baron Rudolf von Bachel is here and I’m sure they’ll know what to do.”

Smirking, he stroked his beard as he ogled Katherine’s legs. Normally this was the part where Tanya would step in to take him down a peg—but then he started boasting.

“Good grief, women these days... Storms right into our great Ode Castle and starts shouting ‘I’m Laplace the Great Sorceress! *Bonjour!*’ Of all the utter nonsense, I tell you... But our Court Grand Mage, Lord Maxwell, he’s been in a sour mood ever since someone felled the Wyvern of the Western Wasteland...



Of course, as an executive director of the esteemed Imperial Magic Association, I've been investigating to the best of my ability, but it certainly hasn't been easy..."

*Aaaand there it is. How did I know this guy would try to flaunt his authority?*

More importantly, however, this middle-aged baron—Rudolf—had just name-dropped Laplace, and Tanya was eager to hear more. She and Katherine exchanged a look.

Then Katherine turned back to Rudolf. "Wow, that's crazy! Laplace, as in, *that* Laplace?" she prompted him casually.

"Hm? Oh, well, it was most likely a load of hogwash, that. Apparently she was recognized as a competitor in the Adventurers' Sparring Tournament. I tell you, whenever I meet a woman who wants to work as an adventurer, I just know she's got problems up here." He pointed at his temple with his index finger.

Tanya leapt to her feet in a rage. "Is that where you want me to stick my sword, asshole?!"

"I beg your pardon?! Who the hell are you?!"

"Oh, uhhh, whoops! Just ignore me!" Covering her mouth, she quickly sat back down.

"So anyways," Katherine continued quickly, "what happened to the fake Laplace lady? Did you let her go?"

"Hmm? I should think not! No, we locked her in the dungeon. Apparently Lord Maxwell wants to interrogate her personally."

"Interesting..."

Meanwhile, Tanya was now more certain than ever. This "fake Laplace" was indeed their Laplace. *But why didn't she tell us she was going to do this?*

"What a nightmare, I must say! Thanks to that fake Laplace, I've been working overtime for days! But a man's got to make his living somehow, I suppose. How I wish I could just track down the culprit who slayed the Wyvern... My subordinates are all useless, I tell you! If only I was there at the scene, I would've used my authority to apprehend them on the spot!"

This gave Tanya an idea... and the next thing she knew, she was moving on autopilot.

“It was me.”

“...What?” Rudolf blinked.

“Um, Tanya?!” Nadine hissed, but Tanya ignored her.

Laplace was currently being held in the Ode Castle dungeon... and this man was her ticket inside. Grinning, she grabbed Rudolf by the collar.

“Are you listening? I said I’m the one who slew the Wyvern.”

“Wh... WHAT? You did *what*?! Who *are* you?!”

While she was at it, as payback for the inappropriate behavior he’d shown toward Katherine, she slammed the hardest part of her boot directly into his shin.

“Gyaaahh!” he yelped.

“You heard me,” Tanya continued slowly, letting every word sink in. “I killed the Wyvern of the Western Wasteland. And you know what else? I broke the seal and set Laplace the Great Sorceress free.”

At this, the color drained from his face. “What?! But no one’s supposed to know the Wicked Dragonwhore was sealed there... I order you to identify yourself!”

“My name is Tanya Artemiciov,” she replied quietly, “and I’m the one who set Laplace free. Now arrest me.”

As she spoke, the golden ring sparkled on her finger.

### 3

Midnight in the Ode Castle dungeon...

The gloomy stone walls were damp and dimly lit. Tanya was imprisoned in the back, in a large cell with no windows or beds—just a row of iron bars separating her from freedom. Fortunately, no one else was in the cell with her.

In the distance, she could hear the growl of an animal, low and gravely... or was it a sob? Was someone being tortured? Either way, it was certainly not pleasant to listen to.

“Alrighty...” Tanya put a hand to the cold floor and pushed herself to her feet.

In order to smuggle herself into the prison where Laplace was being held, she had essentially turned herself in. She’d been hoping she might acquire a new lead during the interrogation or something, but no dice.

She glanced around surreptitiously. The prison guard was conspicuously absent. She was alone.

“Man, security around here is pretty lax...”

Clearing her throat, she began to focus.

*Mana circuits, engage!*

Sure enough, her mana began to flow. As a Magi-Knight, her mana circuits were inherently more streamlined than the average adventurer’s, which made casting magic that much easier.

*Earth Magic, engage!*

Normally, casting would require her to recite an incantation, draw a magic circle, or use a staff for mana support... but right now that function was served by the golden ring on her finger, which held all the power of her Not-Excalibur. Thanks in part to Tanya’s impeccable mana control; being a Magi-Knight made everything easier.

Her go-to strategy was to use Wind Magic to heighten her speed, since it came in handy in a variety of situations—but when she needed a power boost, Earth Magic was the answer. She put both hands on the bars of her cell.

“Grah!”

And with a playful little *crnnkk* sound, the iron bars parted like curtains. Tanya smirked. Being a Magi-Knight certainly had its perks.

“Now then... Time to go find Laplace.”

Keeping her eyes peeled for the first sign of guards, Tanya walked through the dungeon until she arrived at the solitary confinement block.

“Yikes...”

She could hardly believe what she was seeing. It was too painful to look at, and yet she couldn’t tear her eyes away.

“Waaahhh! I’m really sorry, okay?! Please, I’m begging you, just go!!!”

“*Non, non!* I’m the Great Sorceress, remember? If they find out you let me escape, you’ll be in deep trouble.”

“Nnnngghh... Well, I can’t get any sleep if you keep singing at the top of your lungs all night long! It’s been *three days!* I need to sleep or I’m gonna die!”

The prison guard was nearly in tears, and yet a certain someone’s voice was as chipper as ever. Oh, the ignominy!

“Hah hah hah! *Mon dieu*, this feels great!”

*...Yeah, that’s her, alright. Not exactly rocket science.*

“Laplace!” Tanya shouted, unable to stop herself.

The guard flinched as he lay sobbing on the floor. “Gaahh! Wh-Who is it this time?! Where’d you come from?! Someone... Help me...!”

“...Tanya?”

Their eyes met... and the very next moment, Laplace snapped her fingers.

“Mm... mmggppphh?!” the guard grunted, his voice muffled. Tanya recognized it as the same spell Laplace had used on her arch-nemesis Ryan during the Sparring Tournament—a spell that sealed away a person’s ability to speak.

“Are you okay, Lapl—what the?!” As she dashed down the hall to the cell, Tanya came to an abrupt stop. “Seriously?!”

A plush double bed. A stylish lamp in the shape of a bugle. A classy clawfoot sofa. A porcelain tea set. It was plainly obvious that none of these things were

meant to be here. Her “prison cell” looked more like a hotel room, for crying out loud.

“The heck is going on in here?!”

“Hmmm? Are you referring to my exceptionally good taste?”

“...You’re really something, you know that?”

*No wonder the poor prison guard’s crying,* Tanya thought, shooting him a sympathetic look as he continued to grunt on the floor. But this sympathy was short-lived.

“*Excusez-moi,* Tanya, but I think I deserve a little credit for letting him off so easily. You know what he said to me the day I arrived?”

“What?”

“Get a load of this! ‘Been a while since we’ve had such a pretty inmate. I’ll treat you real good, geheheh.’ Can you believe that?”

“...*What?*”

*I regret ever feeling sorry for you.*

Judging from his choice of words, he regularly forced himself on female prisoners when the opportunity arose. Maybe all the prison guards did.

*Ah, I see now. So this man is scum incarnate.*

“Screw you... If you actually cared about treating them right, you’d leave them the hell alone!”

Tanya shook with rage. What if some other woman had been imprisoned instead? Or what if Laplace had been unable to use her mana for whatever reason? He would’ve...

The mere thought made all the hair on her body stand on end.

*“Treat you good,” my ass! You only care about your own pleasure! Fuck off and die!*

And in that flood of emotion—

“Hnn!”

—Tanya threw a kick straight to his groin.

“Gyaahh!” the creepy guard shouted before promptly passing out.

“Good grief, what a monster. I’m not just ‘pretty,’ I’m STUNNING! Get it right!”

“Wh... *That’s* what you’re angry about?!”

It felt like ages since the last time they’d joked around like this. Here they were in a prison cell, and Laplace was still smiling her usual ditzy smile... Now, at last, it was time for Tanya to pour her heart out.

“Laplace, how could you go and disappear on us like that?!” she demanded, her tone angry and accusatory.

At this point, she didn’t care if anyone overheard them. The dam had burst.

“Why?! Why didn’t you say anything to me?! This ring... it meant so much to me! And the barbecue was so much fun! So how could you just... just *vanish* without a word to anyone?!”

Silence fell over the cold stone dungeon as they gazed at each other through the bars. Then, after a breath:

“Can’t you trust us...? Can’t you at least trust *me*?”

“I’m sorry,” Laplace whispered, a pained smile on her face. “You’re right. It’s just... well... This is *my* payback, you see.”

“Payback for what?”

“Tanya... Can I tell you a little story?”

“You can tell me anything.”

“Thanks. Well, come on in. I’ll unlock the door for you.” She gestured for Tanya to step inside.

“Wh... You can unlock the door?!” Tanya asked before she could stop herself.

“Hah hah hah! But of course! Everything’s a piece of cake when you’re a Great Sorceress!” She snapped her fingers, and the cell door swung open just like that.

...Upon further inspection, Tanya realized that the door had been modified so that it locked from the *inside*.

“I should have known...”

Meanwhile, the creepy prison guard lay unconscious on the floor.

*I hope your fucking dick falls off.*

## 5

And so Laplace poured her a piping hot cup of tea from her fancy teapot. (How it was still warm, Tanya had no idea.)

“Now then, seeing as we have all the time in the world... where should I begin?”

Laplace took a sip of her tea and let out a long sigh. She fell silent for a moment, hesitation flickering in her eyes.

“You see, Tanya... this ‘payback’ of mine is to avenge the things that happened to me 300 years ago,” she said after a moment. “First, let’s start with my father... Maxwell the Court Grand Mage.”

## 6

Her father: the Court Grand Mage. Her mother: a shrine maiden at the Temple of the Dragon God said to be his direct descendant. She’d lived a sheltered life, with a wealthy family and a noble bloodline.

At least, that was young Laplace’s perception of her home life, anyway.

“All I need is for you to do exactly as I say.”

This was a sentiment her father, Maxwell, repeated frequently over the years. He was an ambitious man who tended toward self-aggrandizing behavior.

As the Court Grand Mage, Maxwell was desperate to discover the secret of immortality. But Pajan was at war, and there was no time to devote to personal research... so instead he focused his efforts on developing a super-soldier.

A living, breathing tool of genocide. The ultimate pawn that would never die or betray. 300 years ago, such a thing was thought to be unattainable, and yet both sides raced to be the first to develop one.

Meanwhile, Maxwell used every connection and trick at his disposal to arrange for a shrine maiden descended from the Dragon God to be his wife—and Laplace was the product of that marriage. With the blood of the Dragon God in her veins and an innately high mana capacity, she was the perfect “specimen.”

Laplace never once met her birth mother.

Once she was born, her mother was taken back to the Temple, as agreed upon in the contract. Maxwell had no further use for her, after all.

At the very top of the tallest spire in Ode Castle, there was a tiny room where Laplace was kept. As a child, all she ever saw were those four walls and the small fragment of sky visible through her window.

At a very early age, before she had even learned to walk, she was given a number of books, all of them focused on magical studies. This was how she learned to read and write—and the more she copied down the text in the book, the more she came to understand it. All of her time was spent studying.

Then, one day, a servant took pity on her and gave her a picture book. Inside was the story of a fair princess kidnapped by an evil wizard... This single fairytale became Laplace’s only friend.

The wizard had locked the princess away in a tall, tall tower—until one day when a brave and kindhearted prince came to rescue her. In the story, the wizard was ultimately vanquished by the prince.

Laplace never once noticed the similarities between herself and the princess.

“Be a good girl and do as your father tells you. I’m only doing this because I care about you.”

There was one other activity Maxwell permitted Laplace to take part in: human experimentation. Every night, he made her his guinea pig.



“It hurts... I’m scared... I can’t breathe...!”

Those were the only things young Laplace could feel.

As a descendant of the Dragon God, her latent mana capacity was enormous, which was ideal for her father’s purposes. He embedded magical formulas and spells into every drop of blood that flowed through her veins, then made his daughter memorize them. He even made her read the forbidden tomes, though it was said the mere act of reading them would drive anyone mad.

The days turned into weeks... months... years. Her father was her one blood relative, and his word was law. She was not permitted even the *thought* of opposing him—her life simply didn’t have room for that.

“He’s only doing it because he cares about me... because I’m important,” Laplace told herself. She believed that this was normal—that she was just “sheltered.” After all, she had everything she could ever want: food, clothes, an education.

Then, at last, Laplace was “complete.”

With dozens of magical formulas embedded right into her blood, she could wield magic to a degree that was practically unheard of. Her Dragon God heritage had given her near-immortal longevity by default, but Maxwell had taken it upon himself to strengthen it further.

And so the Great Sorceress was born.

## 7

Tanya had no words to express the pain she felt hearing this story.

As they sat there in the quiet cell, Laplace spoke slowly, like the drip of rainwater from the roof.

“Cheer up, Tanya.”

“In the stories I was told... you were gifted, but dangerous,” Tanya replied in a faint, wavering voice. “You were the Wicked Dragonwhore who tried to destroy our country, and that’s why Maxwell the Court Grand Mage had to seal you away. I’ve checked all the history books, and none of them go any further than

that.”

“Interesting. So that’s the story everybody knows, hm? Hilarious—No. I need to stop doing that.”

Laplace bit her lip. She was always so quick to play things off like they were no big deal—but she’d vowed to herself that was going to change. After all, this was the whole reason she’d come here.

“If I’m being honest... it really pisses me off,” she spat.

And so Laplace resumed her story.

## 8

Ten years later, during the height of the Intercontinental War, Laplace was unleashed upon the front lines for the first time. With her vast knowledge of sorcery, sky-high capacity for mana, and body optimized for large-scale combat, she was more than ready.

On the battlefield, the Great Sorceress of Pajan would throw around inhumanly powerful spells left and right. In her free time, she crafted new offensive magical formulas for her fellow Mages in the army. And with her wisdom, the nation’s Magi-Crafters were able to create countless new magical tools and weapons.

And so Laplace led the imperial army to victory against their enemies... but naturally, Maxwell took all the credit for himself. At the time, she was little more than his loyal lapdog. She had no agency of her own; she wasn’t allowed any. She was merely his creation, produced with his genes and perfected through his research.

He was obsessed with her. Likewise, her feelings for him exceeded the love of a daughter. She was dependent upon him... and afraid of him.

But as for Maxwell...

“Why must immortality continue to elude me so?!”

Narcissistic to a disgusting degree, all he cared about was his own ambition.

The key to making his daughter immortal lay in her blood, inherited from the Dragon God. And, due to his achievements, his reputation as the Court Grand Mage was at an all-time high.

But though he yearned for the power of immortality, he never managed to attain it. This drove him mad with jealousy... and that jealousy, in turn, drove him to commit a reprehensible crime.

This was the lost truth left out of—or more accurately, erased from—all the history books.

Maxwell decided to perform a ritual that would siphon life energy from the citizens... all to sate his own greed.

He minted coins out of orichalcum, an alloy that could conduct mana. Then he cleverly imbued them with a spell formula that would absorb the vitality of any living being... and distributed them throughout Pajan. By absorbing their life force, he would gain a sort of “immortality”—or so he planned.

But right as his plan was one step away from fruition, it was dashed when one of his subordinate Court Mages reported him to the authorities.

## 9

“You mean...?”

“*Oui, oui.* You guessed correctly.”

The Great Sorceress looked at Tanya, her pale pink hair glowing in the darkness. Her expression... was one of abject misery.

At this, Laplace shut her eyes tightly.

*Oh, Tanya. This injustice is three centuries old, and yet you'll mourn it with me all the same, won't you?*

This evoked in her a most peculiar sensation—not unlike butterflies in her stomach.

It was time to finish the story.

“You can probably guess what happened next. My father... Maxwell... He blamed the entire orichalcum coin incident on the ‘Wicked Dragonwhore.’ Me. His own flesh and blood.”

Tanya sucked in a breath.

“They tried several times to execute me, but fortunately—or unfortunately, as the case may be—I was already immortal. So while it hurt quite a bit, ultimately, I just couldn’t die,” Laplace explained casually, like she was commenting on the weather.

Tanya could only imagine what it must have felt like to *survive an execution*. Not only that, but to be sealed in a mountain in the Western Wasteland, where no one would ever find her... all at the hands of *her own father*...

In the end, the orichalcum coins were lost, only to be “rediscovered” many years later and put on display as antiques. And so the history books were forever altered... with Laplace, not Maxwell, recorded as the villain.

“...But...”

“Hmm?”

“But... you’re so powerful, Laplace! Surely you could’ve put Maxwell in his place if you’d tried!”

“That’s just the thing, Tanya. I didn’t try,” Laplace replied quietly.

Tanya’s soft gasp echoed off the stone cell walls.

This was the woman who could control the weather if she pleased. She could levitate. Hell, she was immortal. But when Maxwell sold her out, it wasn’t anger she felt—it was despair. It was heartbreak. It was regret. She’d asked herself, *why? What did I ever do wrong?*

She’d tried so hard to be the perfect daughter. She’d endured so much. Destroyed so much. Killed so many. Surely her father would never abandon her... and yet he did... which meant...

“I told myself that... I deserved it for being a bad daughter.”

Tanya’s breath hitched.

“I told myself... if I wasn’t such a failure, then maybe my father would have listened to me. Maybe then he wouldn’t have sealed me away. But by then it was too late, so I just... shrugged my shoulders and gave up. But then *you* showed up, Tanya. I watched you scream and vent your anger right there in the wasteland with me. And then I watched you carry out your revenge on that asshole Ryan...”

Laplace let out a hollow laugh. The smile on her face was one Tanya had never seen before—bitter, pained, like she was holding back tears.

“And I thought: if only *I’d* stood up for myself like that, things would’ve been different, you know?”

“...Yeah...”

For 300 years, Laplace had asked herself again and again: Where did I go wrong? How did I screw it all up?

Eventually she decided that if she was ever unsealed, she wanted to experience a life of freedom—perhaps as an adventurer or something. Maybe then she could make some friends... For her, it was an ambitious dream.

“But I never imagined it would actually come true one day,” Laplace muttered to herself.

Just then, something warm brushed against her. It was Tanya’s hand—the one bearing the gleaming golden ring. She took Laplace’s hand in hers.

“Listen, Laplace...”

“...Yeah?”

“I, um... I think it’s my turn to help you get revenge,” she declared after a moment.

The way Tanya looked straight into her eyes... Somehow, it made her feel *seen*.

“I appreciate that, but... while Maxwell may not be as powerful as yours truly, he’s still a capable spellcaster in his own right,” Laplace warned her. “Not only that, but he’s the *Court Grand Mage*. If we rise up against him, we might just turn the whole country against us... Are you prepared to risk that?”

But Tanya Artemiciov wasn't the type of woman to back down. And Laplace knew that better than anyone.

Sure enough, Tanya smirked. "Laplace?"

"...Yeah?"

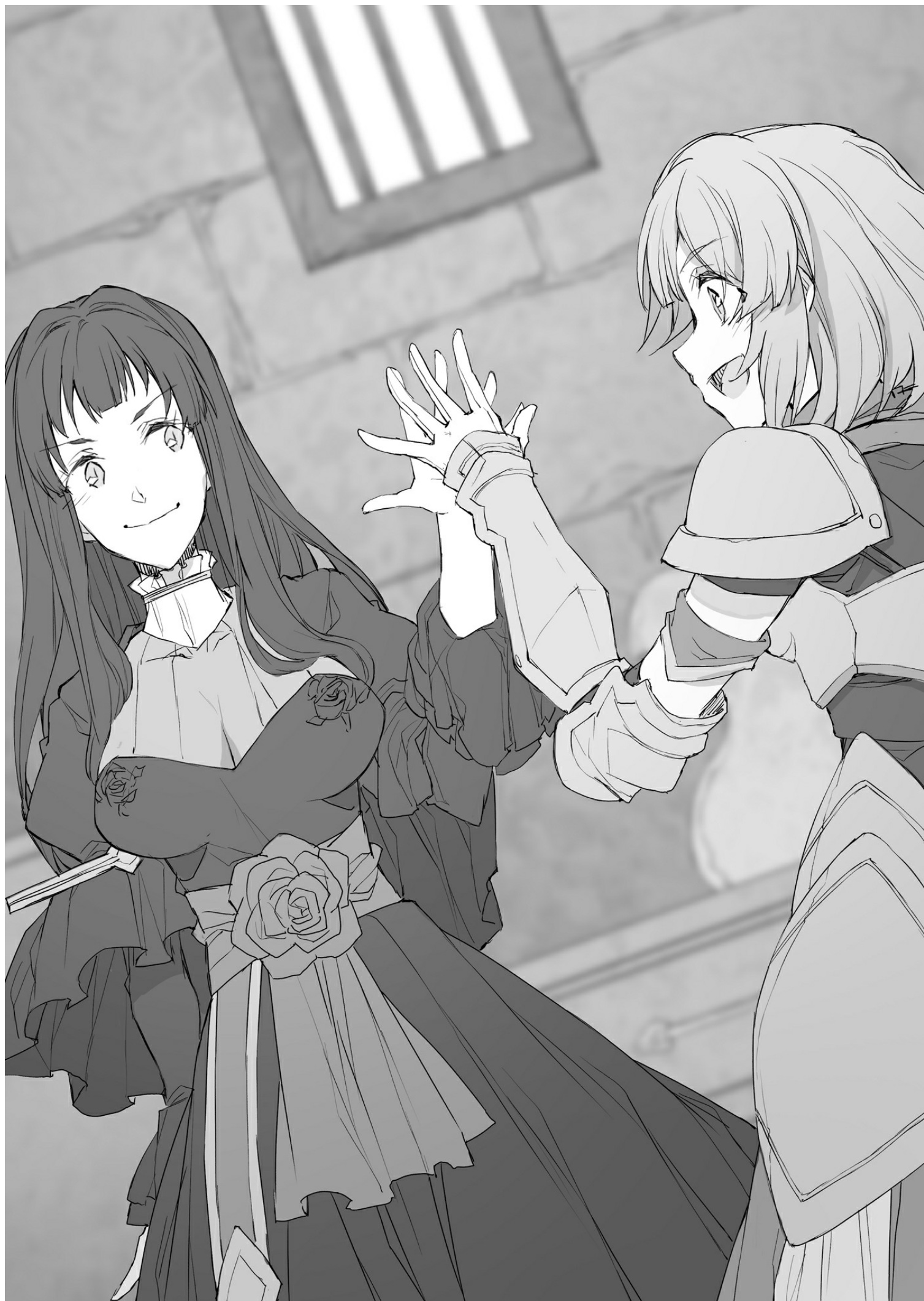
Her smile was contagious, and soon Laplace was smiling, too. There they were, sharing a moment in a prison cell Laplace could easily break them out of with a mere snap of her fingers.

At the same time they shouted:

"Let's kick his ass!"

"Can we go kick his ass?!"

This was followed shortly by a *clap* as the pair exchanged a high-five.



## 10

And so they waltzed right out of the dungeon.

“Oh, yes, that reminds me, Tanya,” Laplace said suddenly as they were walking through the castle.

“What is it, Laplace?”

Laplace paused to pull a leather pouch out of her chest pocket. Its contents jingled with the motion.

“Wait... Is that...?”

“These are all the orichalcum coins I’ve collected.”

She opened the pouch to show Tanya. Sure enough, the coins inside looked identical to the one they’d seen at that magic supply store.

“This should be all the coins in the capital. I can’t in good conscience let the civilians hold onto them, after all.”

“So you *stole* them?!”

“*Non, non!* It’s okay! I replaced every coin I took with one of my custom-made accessories. A necklace here, a bracelet there...”

“Uhhh... Those sound... prohibitively expensive...”

Anything handmade by Laplace was, by default, ultra-high-quality. Thinking back, it was one of those very accessories that had saved them from a life of destitution once upon a time...

“*Oui, en effet!* Oh, but I haven’t made any other rings, just so you know. Yours is one of a kind.”

With a playful wink, Laplace pocketed the leather pouch.



## Chapter 5: An Audience with the Princess

### 1

Tanya was doing her best to keep it down, she really was. But her voice had a way of carrying.

“Holy crap, what *is* this stuff?! It’s so good!”

“Shhhh! Tanya, keep your voice down or they’ll find us!”

Their anticlimactic escape out of the dungeon had led them to— “I’m sorry, but this food is *divine*!”

“The roast pork is simply scrumptious, isn’t it? 300 years later, they’re still using the same great recipe.”

“Yeah... Really wish I had some ice-cold beer to go with it, though!”

—the kitchens.

It was the middle of the night, so naturally the place was deserted. Except for Tanya and Laplace, of course, who found themselves rooting through the “refrigerator,” a magical appliance powered by Ice Magic that was used to keep food fresh. What were they doing, you ask? Sampling the castle’s royal leftovers and having themselves a feast fit for an emperor. Seriously, ladies, save some for the rest of us.

“Tanya, you’ve got a little something on your lip there.”

“Mmmn? Oh, you do, too. Let me get that for you.”

“Mm!”

Laplace obediently leaned forward, and Tanya wiped her mouth for her.  
“There, got it.”

“*Merci*!”

“You’re welcome. Okay, my turn!” She leaned forward, just as Laplace had.

But Laplace tilted her head, puzzled. “Hmm? What’s this about? Wait... Are you waiting for a kiss?!”

“Wh...?! I’m waiting for you to wipe my mouth, obviously! Otherwise it’s kinda backwards, don’t you think?! Er... I’m not sure *how* it’s backwards, exactly, but yeah!”

Meanwhile, as the two women kept digging—“Can’t get revenge on an empty stomach, after all!”—someone quietly approached them from behind.

“What the... Lady Tanya?! And Lady Stone Cold Stunner?!” exclaimed a clear, beautiful voice.

“AAAHH!”

They whirled around to find a single figure standing there in the oversized kitchen.

Long silver hair. Violet eyes.

It was the girl they’d met on the balcony at the soirée... Arianora, the Crown Princess of Pajan.

“Well now, if it isn’t little Ari!”

“So it *is* you! Wh... What are you doing here...?!”

This time Her Highness was wearing a loose white nightgown, no constricting corset to be seen. This, too, was made of silk, with the imperial flower crest embroidered neatly onto it. Just then, her eyes lit up.

“Say, um... would you maybe want to come back with me to my room?!”

Tanya and Laplace exchanged a glance. An invitation to the Princess’s royal bedchamber was more than they ever could have hoped for.

## 2

And so a very giddy Arianora led them all the way to the top of the Western Tower, where her bedroom was located. Truth be told, they were fortunate enough that she hadn’t alerted the authorities straight away, but Laplace in particular was feeling antsy. She wanted to find Maxwell as soon as possible.

Together, they slipped past the stationed guards... but when they entered Arianora's room, Laplace was stunned.

"I can't believe it..."

As it turned out, she recognized it. Long, long ago, this was the very room where Laplace was confined for the entirety of her childhood. Unable to speak, she simply stared at the stone walls. It was just as she remembered it, too. *Fate works in mysterious ways, it seems.*

"Come on in! It's a bit cramped, but feel free to have a seat wherever you like!" Arianora announced gleefully.

"Oh, um... thank you," Tanya replied quietly, scanning the room.

While Her Highness called it "cramped," it was easily more than twice the size of Lilium's hotel room... and yet it was intended for only one person. *Must be nice to be royalty*, Tanya thought to herself, impressed. She plopped down on the sofa to find it pillowy soft, like a big marshmallow.

"Listen, um... Please don't tell anyone I went to the kitchen for a midnight snack, okay?" said Arianora.

"*D'accord, d'accord...* As long as *you* don't tell anyone about our little impromptu visit," Laplace replied as she joined Tanya on the couch.

Arianora giggled mischievously. She really did seem like an ordinary girl in every way.

*Reminds me of my little sisters back home*, Tanya thought. "Say, Your Highness?"

"Lady Tanya, as I've asked you before, please... call me Arianora."

"Okay, um... Princess Arianora? Why were you in the kitchen so late at night?"

Granted, she could understand the desire for a midnight snack, but what was a girl her age doing awake at this hour? Plus, eating late at night wasn't a healthy habit in general. Wasn't she worried about acne? Or weight gain?

"Come now, Tanya, we can't criticize her for that. We were doing the same thing, were we not? The only thing worse than a hypocrite is an unhealthy

hypocrite.”

“Gah...”

“That said... the roast pork was heavenly, wasn’t it?”

“*Gah!*”

Tanya winced. That one really stung. Meanwhile, Arianora gazed at them rapturously.

“Tell me, have you been hired to serve at the castle? Will I be able to see you every day?!”

“Uhhhh...”

Laplace averted her eyes. This was no time to kick back and relax; after all, they had to take into consideration the possibility that this was all a trap. She took a deep breath, exhaled... and cleared her throat. She was done beating around the bush.

“You know what, Ari? I’m just going to ask you flat-out.”

“What is it?”

“We’re looking for someone—Maxwell, the Court Grand Mage. Do you know where he is?”

At this, Arianora tilted her head with a frown.

“What do you mean? Lord Maxwell is right behind you.”

### **3**

“What?!”

Their hearts in their throats, they whirled around to find... a fancy little vanity table. No sign of Maxwell.

“Heehee! Tricked you!”

“You little monster...!” Tanya exclaimed, sinking back onto the sofa. “I nearly had a heart attack for a second there!”

“Good grief... Crafty little goblin,” Laplace sighed.

“Anyway, all jokes aside... I was just with him a moment ago.”

“What?! Really?!”

“Yes, in the underground laboratory.”

“Right, that place... I’m amazed he would drag you down there this late at night.”

“But what business would Lilium have with him?” Arianora asked, puzzled.

“Well, you see, Ari...” Laplace reached out and took her by the arm.

Then she rolled up the sleeve of her nightgown.

“Aah!”

“What...?” Tanya could scarcely believe what she was seeing.

“I came here... to stop this cruelty.”

Silver hair. Violet eyes.

“If I had to guess... I’d say you’ve got the blood of the White Dragon in your veins, don’t you?” Laplace asked quietly.

There, illuminated by the moonlight, was Arianora’s arm—covered in cuts and injection marks.

“Th... This is nothing! It’ll go away after a few days!”

“I’m afraid that’s not the problem here. *Mon dieu*... To think the old man hasn’t made a lick of progress in 300 years.”

Laplace recognized those marks on Arianora’s arm. It was like looking at a replica of her younger self. After all, she was dissected and injected in much the same way, once upon a time.

*Maxwell, you bastard. You’re experimenting on the Princess, and this late at night? Shame on you. You think you have the right to lay a hand on a member of the Pajan royal family? Are you that entitled?*

She clenched her jaw.

*If only I’d let myself get mad... if only I’d stood up for myself... this little girl would never have had to suffer.*

“Umm...?”

Confused, Arianora stared at Laplace. It was just so odd to see this venerable tournament champion getting angry on her behalf. To the Princess, this was simply another inescapable part of her everyday life.

She was only a girl, after all. As a girl, she would never have the right to ascend the throne. She was of no importance to this country—not until she was old enough to be used as a pawn in a political marriage, of course. And besides...

“Ari? You still with us?” Laplace asked after a moment of silence.

“Y-Yes, of course. What is it?”

“...I’ll bet it really hurt, didn’t it?”

The hem of Laplace’s black dress fluttered as she pulled the girl into her arms. It felt like she was hugging her past self.

Meanwhile, Arianora struggled to understand what she was feeling. It was such a simple question—so why did it make her heart ache so badly? Surely she was used to the pain by now.

Of course, this was a mindset Laplace was all too familiar with.

“Listen, um...!” Arianora began, though she couldn’t will herself to pull away from the embrace.

*Why? Why are you both being so nice to me? And how are you both so strong?*

But before she could ask, the door suddenly flew open.

“Who are you people?!” a woman’s voice called sharply.

“...Uh oh.”

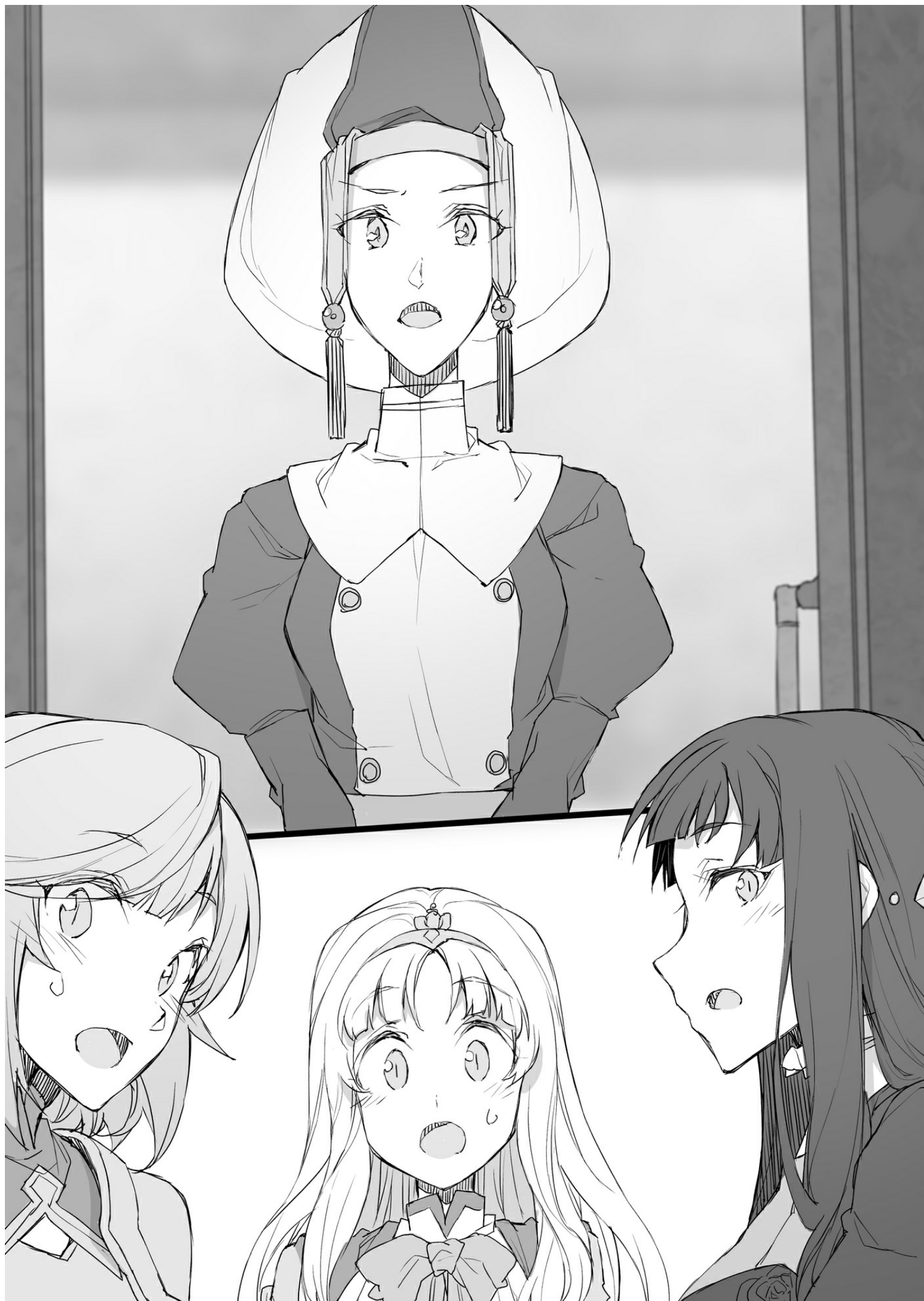
“This doesn’t sound good, does it, Tanya?”

Standing in the doorway was a woman wearing a long white robe, her hair carefully concealed under a habit. Hers was the garb of a pure and pious lady-in-waiting.

Arianora hastily leapt away from Laplace. “No, Vis! It’s not what you think!”

But the woman—“Vis,” as she was called—didn’t bat a lash.

She was the personal attendant to the Crown Princess of Pajan, and she had just caught them red-handed.





## 4

Naturally, their first reaction to this sudden intruder was for Tanya to use Wind Magic to apprehend the woman at the speed of light while Laplace snapped her fingers to seal her voice and prevent her from calling for help. Problem solved. And what a piece of cake, too! Well... mostly.

“Man, we’re lucky she didn’t call for the guards.”

“*Magnifique!* That was some excellent teamwork!”

Meanwhile, Vis glared silently at the women of Liliun as Arianora tried her best to explain.

“L-Listen, Vis! I’m really sorry! I, um... I invited—”

But Tanya and Laplace cut in loudly, drowning out her little voice: “Whoa, whoa, whoa!!!”

“Hey, hey, hey!!!”

Startled, Arianora looked up at them. Laplace smirked.

“You know, Tanya, it sure was easy, forcing the princess to let us up here under threat of violence!”

“I know, right? It’s so much easier to break out of jail when you have a hostage!”

“*Oui, oui!* The princess was completely opposed to it, but we bullied her into it!”

“Yep!”

The princess stared, mouth agape, as the two women rambled at length, each in perfect sync with the other.

“Right, Your Highness?” Tanya winked.

Arianora stared blankly for a moment, then snapped to her senses. “R-Right,” she nodded. Tanya grinned back at her.

They couldn’t in good conscience have Arianora take the fall for letting a

couple of intruders into her bedroom. For one thing, it would be pretty uncool of them; a disgrace to the name of Liliun. And for another, well... it would make things a lot more complicated. Thus, they chose to frame this as yet another crime they were committing.

Tanya knew it was for the best, and yet...

“Ugh... I’m gonna have to flee the country after this, aren’t I?” she sighed. “Man, that sucks.”

“Hahaha! Too late for regrets now, Tanya!” Laplace grinned. “Oh, that gives me an idea. Once I use my powers as a Sorceress to beat the stuffing out of Maxwell, why don’t you and I go on a little world tour?”

Just then—

“...What?” Arianora cocked her head. “Did you just say ‘my powers as a Sorceress’? Lady Stone Cold Stunner... are you... *Laplace the Great Sorceress*?”

“Oops.”

*Crap.* They’d both forgotten to keep Laplace’s true identity concealed. Arianora’s jaw dropped as she stared up at the once-infamous Wicked Dragonwhore.

But Laplace merely winked at her. “Indeed, I am Laplace the Great Sorceress. I bet you didn’t see that one coming, did you? Hmm?”

“Ah... wh...”

Arianora’s rosy lips trembled as tears filled her eyes.

“...out of... please...”

“Huh?”

Her small, pale hand clutched desperately at Laplace’s skirt—and she screamed: “Please, you have to get out of here! *Right now!*”

## 5

Meanwhile, in the underground prison, two shadows stood concealed in the darkness.

“Looks like they’ve already escaped. No surprise there, of course.”

They stared down at the guard passed out on the floor in spectacularly cartoonish fashion.

“He’s out cold, it seems.”

“Yep. Totally zonked out.”

On the left was a woman with long lavender hair worn in braids—Nadine. Though she held a Healer’s staff, her roots as a proud Assassin were shining through; she was dressed head to toe in black, tight-fitting clothes, with concealed weapons hidden strategically all over her body.

Next to her stood a foxkin woman with thick, luxurious blonde hair—Katherine the Mage. The long sleeves of her shrine maiden uniform were tied up with a tasuki sash for increased range of movement.

Katherine, a Mage whose primary focus was long-range attacks. Nadine, a Healer with the stealth and close combat skills of an Assassin. In terms of offense, they had all the bases covered. However...

“Um... are you sure about this?” Asked Katherine hesitantly.

“Huh? About what?”

“You know... sneaking into the castle? I should think this is obvious, but what we’re doing is a capital offense.”

Nadine reached into her hip pouch and pulled out a series of tools and magical items with which she proceeded to carefully scan the floor and walls, searching for any trace of their party leader.

You see, after Tanya was arrested, Nadine had hatched a plan of her own. Granted, perhaps Tanya and Laplace were strong enough to rescue themselves without outside assistance, but even so... Tanya was the woman who, when Nadine pledged to serve as her blade in the shadows, told Nadine she was free to remain as a Healer, since it was the path she had chosen for herself. This one small comment had won Nadine’s loyalty, and ever since then, she wanted to help Tanya however she could.

“Shouldn’t you... think it through a little more?” she frowned.

Although Katherine had proven herself during Anca's civil dispute, she was still only a temporary member. She was by no means obligated to expose herself to this level of risk.

"Excuse me?" Katherine snorted. Then she thrust out her chest. "I made this choice. And besides... it's you guys we're talking about."

"Huh?"

"How could you forget? Your party leader went up on stage at the Sparring Tournament and gave that big speech about how all girls are allowed to dream of adventure, regardless of men or marriage or whatever."

The memory of Tanya standing behind the podium flashed through Nadine's mind. She hadn't realized that her speech had touched someone so close to them.

"...I take it she won you over, too."

"Yeah, something like that."

But it wasn't just Tanya; truth be told, Nadine had done a lot to win her over, too. Like that time during the Tournament, right after they'd just fought each other, when Nadine came to the restroom where Katherine was hiding in order to bring her a change of clothes. But before Katherine could say anything—"Oh!" Nadine exclaimed, knocking on the cell wall in a careful, practiced way. "There's a hidden door here!"

She pressed on each of the nearby bricks until finally, there was a dull *clunk*.

"Wh... What's happening?!"

With a series of gravelly clacking sounds, the bricks slid away to reveal—"It appears to be a secret staircase. Shall we?"

Nadine stepped down without further hesitation. But before Katherine could follow, she suddenly came to a stop—"GOTCHA!!!"

Nadine whirled around, and a sharp gust of wind shot past Katherine's cheek. She didn't realize what had happened until the guardsman let out a yelp directly behind her, the tip of a throwing dagger embedded halfway through his palm.

“Wh... What the?!”

“That man was only pretending to be unconscious. He was looking up your, um, what’s it called... hakama skirt. Pretty gross, actually.”

“Excuse me?!? Fuck off, dude!!! Go do your job!!!”

*If you knew there were intruders, why didn’t you go call for backup or something, you lazy twit?!* Fueled by her contempt, Katherine swung her leg up — “Guh!”

—and drove the hard part of her boot directly into his jaw. Once again, the guard passed out, this time with a copious nosebleed (but not the fun kind).

“Fuck you, you dirty old man!!!”

Then she flipped up her skirt.

“Too bad for you, I’m wearing compression shorts under here!”

The best thing about Laplace’s custom armor: full coverage.

## 6

With infiltration expert Nadine leading the way, the two of them progressed deeper underground.

Down... down... down...

Katherine wasn’t used to sneaking around like this. But just as she nearly lost all sense of time— “...What?!”

“What *is* this?!”

The narrow stairwell opened up—and what they saw made them shiver in fear.

Spell runes covered the walls surrounding rows upon rows of cylindrical tanks, each of them filled to the brim with some sort of pale, cloudy liquid. There, floating inside each tank, was a human—a little girl—sound asleep.

It was so sickening... so *twisted*. Katherine had studied a fair bit of magic, but even she couldn’t decipher the room’s intended purpose. All she knew for

certain... was that this technology was unheard of in traditional sorcery.

“Ugh... We should go back, Nadine. This place doesn’t feel right!”

“Agreed!”

The two women took a step back. They needed to find the others—*fast*.

## Chapter 6: The Court Grand Mage

### 1

Before Nadine and Katherine could escape from the sinister underground facility—

“Well, well. Of all the surprise visitors.”

—a man’s voice called out to them, flat and emotionless. There was something about its emptiness that sent a shiver up their spines. The sight of the figure before them threatened to make Katherine’s legs give out.

“Wh... Who are you?!”

His face was shrouded in shadow. Katherine held her staff at the ready as Nadine pulled out a combat knife.

Then they heard the *clack, clack* of dramatic footsteps... and the man stepped into the light.

He was pale, with sharp eyes and a faint smile. Katherine’s first reaction: *wow, he’s actually kind of hot*. But those dark, murky eyes evoked a deep, primal fear she couldn’t explain. Almost like he wasn’t human.

“Run,” Nadine whispered.

“What?”

“Please, Katherine, you have to run. We can’t...”

No... Her voice was less of a whisper and more of a barely restrained scream.

“We can’t fight him!”

Katherine’s eyes widened. *Did Nadine just tell me to run?*

Her chest ached.

For years she’d worked her ass off. As an adventurer, as a Mage—and often,

the only woman in the party. And this wasn't the first time she'd been given similar orders. Far from it.

*Stay back—it's not safe for a woman. The men will handle this. You get out of here.*

She knew they were only trying to protect her, but... it always left her feeling so powerless.

*Men need to be strong to protect women, while women need to be protected.*

From an early age, she remembered the red-faced middle-aged men who would frequent her grandmother's restaurant... and the comments they would make to her every night.

*"You're a pretty girl, Katherine."*

*"I bet you'll find a good husband someday."*

*"Get yourself a real man to protect you."*

They always waited until her grandmother was distracted with other work to say these things, too. And perhaps their hearts were in the right place—perhaps they were only looking out for her well-being. But their comments festered in her chest like a disease.

And as time wore on, she only heard more of the same sentiments—at the Imperial Magic Academy, in adventuring school, and even after she graduated. But it wasn't what she wanted.

*"...No, you."*

*"Wait, what? Katherine?"*

*"I said, you run!"*

Katherine turned back to the expressionless, dark-haired man and held her staff at the ready. Deep down, what she always wanted was—

*"You hear me?! You're the one who's going to escape, not me! I'll buy you some time, so... use your agility or whatever and get out of here! I know you can do it, Nadine!"*



“No... I can’t just leave you!”

—to protect someone else.

That was her deepest, most desperate wish. She still remembered the way little Anca had looked at her during the duel, her eyes full of trust.

“After what you’ve seen, I’m afraid I cannot simply let you escape,” the man stated mechanically. But Katherine didn’t back down.

“Quiet, you. I’m gonna bust out my albino foxkin secret technique!”

“Katherine!”

*“Run for it, Nadine! Round and round the wheel turns... O holy Amaterasu, ignite your flames and let your sacred mirror shine! **Foxfire Flash!**”*

The next instant, a blinding light erupted from the tip of Katherine’s staff—multiple times, in quick intervals. This spell was designed to dazzle the eyes; in combat it created a split-second distraction.

“Ngh... Be safe!” Nadine shouted—and then she took off running.

Meanwhile, she thought to herself... how could that man have managed to conceal his presence from her? Who was he?

Nadine bit her lip. She knew she didn’t have the strength to fight him, and she knew Katherine wasn’t fast enough to escape him. Ultimately, this was the best choice available to them.

*Promise me we’ll meet again, Katherine!*

She could hear spells exploding somewhere behind her... but Nadine didn’t look back.

She needed to hurry and find the others ASAP.

## 2

Meanwhile, in the western tower, the topic of conversation was nearly identical:

“You want me to... escape? What for?” asked Laplace.

Likewise, Tanya wasn't sure why the princess was quite so panicked. What was she afraid of? Tanya had no idea. All she knew was that Arianora had an intense reaction to the name Laplace.

Running *from* Laplace would make sense—after all, she was the mythical Wicked Dragonwhore or whatever. But no... Arianora seemed to fear for Laplace's safety.

"You want me, the Great Sorceress, to turn tail and run? I'm afraid that's a tall order, Ari."

"Listen, Princess... I don't think you understand just how strong we are."

"*Oui, oui!* Surely you saw us at the Sparring Tournament, did you not?"

Tanya nodded in agreement. They wouldn't go down easily—or so she hoped, at least. Sure, their opponent was the so-called "immortal" Court Grand Mage who had sealed Laplace away for 300 years, but they weren't exactly pushovers themselves, right?

"I know, but... you mustn't stay! You have to run!" Arianora insisted. She was clearly terrified of *something*, but what?

Laplace let out a sigh. "Fine, fine. *C'est bon, d'accord*. But could you at least explain why? If you must know, I'm simply *burning* with the desire to punch Fa—er, Maxwell—right in the face."

At this, Arianora's gaze wavered... in the direction of her bound and gagged attendant, Vis.

"Is it something you don't want her to hear?"

"No..."

Arianora and Vis held eye contact for a moment, and then Vis quietly nodded.

*Who IS this woman? I can't quite get a read on her*, Laplace thought to herself. Something about her seemed... inconsistent, though Laplace couldn't put her finger on what.

Then Arianora began to speak—quietly, but firmly.

"I'll give you the short version. This information is all strictly confidential, of

course... and... once I've explained everything, it is my sincere wish that you, Lady Tanya, and you, Lady Laplace, will help me find a solution to that which troubles me."

Her expression didn't belong to a thirteen-year-old girl, but an Aweigkorrt... a nation's ruler.

"Over the past 300 years, Lord Maxwell has been using his authority as Court Grand Mage to create... a dreadful weapon."

"A weapon, you say?"

"Yes. And if he captures you, Lady Laplace, he will seize all of Pajan within an instant."

At this, Tanya hastily cut in. "Look, uh, I don't see where you're going with this, Your Highness." All she knew was that it sounded really, really bad.

Arianora closed her eyes and sighed quietly, as if to keep herself calm. "Forgive me. It appears I'll need to explain in greater detail."

And so she recounted the evil deeds of Maxwell the Court Grand Mage.

Once upon a time, 300 years ago—Pajan was at war, Laplace was the perfect super-soldier, and immortality was almost within Maxwell's grasp. These three things corrupted him deeply.

Laplace had served to bring him glory, but now her existence poisoned his heart.

"Using the technology he's honed over the past 300 years, he's now trying to mass produce Lady Laplace."

"Mass produce a knockout like yours truly?"

"Yes. You see, after he sealed you away... he came to sorely regret it."

"...Really now?"

"He missed having the power to dominate foreign countries, and he believed you were the missing component to unlocking his own immortality."

"Oh, right. So *that's* what he regretted. Got it." Laplace let out a self-deprecating laugh. "Just a component. I should've known."

Indeed, these days she knew better. These days she understood that Maxwell was only interested in her not as a daughter, but as a tool he could use.

“Maxwell would always tell me that you had a rebellious glint in your eyes. And although you complied with his orders, deep down, you opposed him.”

“Hahaha! How very perceptive. Truth be told, I *wanted* to stand up to him—I just didn’t know how.”

“Because of that, he has spent every waking moment of the past 300 years trying to create a version of you that he can control like a puppet. And after dipping into the imperial treasury time and again... at long last, We are the end result.”

“...‘We’...?”

“Yes. We are mere vessels created in her image.”

“...What?”

“However,” Arianora continued, “We are far from complete. Maxwell has said that he requires the blood of the Dragon God—Lady Laplace’s blood—to finish Us. Thus, he has said he would need to break the powerful seal upon you in order to perfect his creations.”

It was a serious story, to be sure, but Tanya couldn’t help but scoff at him silently. *What, you can’t reverse your own spell? What kind of Mage are you?*

“But Maxwell has already learned of your revival. He knows you are here. Please, I’m begging you... Without your blood, his despicable desires will never come to fruition. Ever. That is why I need you to escape.” Arianora hesitated, then finished, “Or failing that... you must defeat him and cure Pajan of this corruption!”

Her tone was desperate. Pleading.

“I don’t care how long We are forced to suffer—you mustn’t let Maxwell complete Us, no matter what!”

“Hmmm...” Laplace murmured to herself.

*So all that glory and prestige STILL isn’t enough for him? He STILL wants to be immortal? Of course. He’s not satisfied with JUST mass-producing a bunch of*

*miserable little girls. No, he's a filthy beast that bites the hand that feeds him. And someone needs to put this rotting zombie back in its grave.*

*"Très bien.* Just so we're clear, I was already planning on punching him, but I can end his life if need be. He has no business being immortal, that's for sure."

*But first...*

"Now then, could you tell me a bit more about these 'vessels' you speak of?"

### 3

" 'To all the little girls out there who dream of adventure...' "

Arianora Aweigkorrt could only pray that, in her next life, she would have the freedom to pursue her dreams.

Arianora (or as she was known then, Nameless Girl) was born inside an incubator deep underground, where no sunlight could reach. It was a small, cramped space, and she was but one of many, many Others. She couldn't remember when it had happened, but at some point she gained sentience, right there in the tank.

These girls were artificially created with the blood of the White Dragon, the Black Dragon, and who knows what else. Above all, They existed to serve Maxwell.

He created vessels of all different kinds. Either They were used as disposable guinea pigs in his experiments, or They were left in their tanks to rot; once Maxwell determined that the power They possessed was lesser than that of the Great Sorceress, They were deemed worthless in his eyes.

They were tools to be used up and thrown away. And when Their bodies decayed, They were repurposed as nutrients for the next girl. Floating lifelessly in their tanks, they were all merely Nameless Girls. Created only as tools, born only to ultimately die.

They were pawns. Stepping stones to a perfectly subservient Laplace. Here in the laboratory, that was all They could ever be.

And yet...

“I shall give you a name... Henceforth, you shall be known as Arianora Aweigkorrt.”

Suddenly—through luck or misfortune, she couldn’t be sure—one Nameless Girl had a name.

The Emperor of Pajan was a painfully mediocre man. He had no ill intent, but he lacked ambition. Nor did he possess the courage to break away from those traditions that survived through sheer inertia.

Maxwell was a legend. He wielded powerful influence over the Aweigkorrt royal family. And the Emperor was not strong enough to oppose him.

Only once had he and his beloved Empress managed to conceive a child. Tragically, the pregnancy ended in stillbirth, and the Empress had sunk into a deep depression.

Then *he* showed up—the parasite who had clung to Pajan for the past 300 years. It was Maxwell, the legendary Court Grand Mage. And he told them he could replace the child that they’d lost.

“We can summon your beloved daughter back into this world.”

With the technology he had fervently dedicated his life to researching, such a thing would be all too easy, he told them.

To toy with human life was terribly taboo, but the emperors of the past had all turned a blind eye to Maxwell’s misdeeds. And now the present Emperor looked upon this forbidden technology—and rejoiced.

And so the little guinea pig was scooped out of her tank and given the name of Arianora, the precious princess of Pajan. Meanwhile, Maxwell’s distasteful experiments continued... but the Emperor did nothing to stop him. Those nameless lives meant nothing to the named.

Newly imprisoned in the role of princess, the little girl thought to herself:

*What makes me so different from my “useless” sisters? What am I? What are We? And... why am I the only one given the privilege of a name?*

“...So in the end, I’m not a princess. I’m just a counterfeit—an impostor wearing her name,” Arianora explained as Laplace and Tanya listened quietly. “We are not people; We are merely tools for Maxwell to use. He deemed Us convenient to have, and so We were created. That is the only reason We exist.”

Now that she had said her piece, Tanya timidly spoke up. “Princess...”

“Lady Tanya, I told you, I am no princess. I am merely one of Them.”

*I’m not worthy of any special title. But as long as I keep serving my purpose—as long as I help Laplace escape, thereby preventing Our full transformation into weapons—the world will remain at peace.*

But before she could put this concept to words, Tanya spoke again.

“But then... how come you’re playing along?”

“Wh... What?” Arianora faltered. “Well... because...”

But before she could find the words, something clattered to the floor. All three turned in the direction of the sound. Arianora gasped.

“Vis...?”

It was Arianora’s attendant. Thus far she had sat there in silence, but now she was aggressively fighting her restraints, trying to break free. Arianora drew in a breath at the sight.

Meanwhile, Laplace put a hand to her chin in contemplation. “Hmm... It appears as though she’d like to say something.”

“...Lady Laplace, if you don’t mind, um, could you...”

“Free her?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm... Well, I don’t mind, as long as she doesn’t start yelling for help... Plus, this seems important.”

Laplace snapped her fingers. A split-second later, the dam burst and Vis’s voice erupted from her mouth.

“—With all due respect, Her Highness was only doing her duty!” she shouted. “She never asked for this, but nonetheless, she pours her heart and soul into her work, all for the citizens of Pajan! I’ve seen it for myself—I was right there with her every step of the way!”

“Vis...!”

As an attendant, she was always close at hand—and always eager to nag. But truth be told, she cared more than anyone. She knew Arianora was an impostor; she knew the suffering Arianora willingly endured night after night, all so she could faithfully uphold her role as princess. Vis saw it all.

“Our princess is a good person.”

A good, kindhearted, nameless person.

“Please, Lady Laplace. You have to escape from Ode Castle... and never return. If you wish to see Arianora safe, then you must leave this country.”

The look in her eyes was dead serious.

“Hey...!” Tanya objected. She knew they had a point, but she took offense to the idea that fighting wasn’t an option.

But Laplace held out a hand to stop her and turned back to the others.

“Now, now, I’ll thank you not to underestimate me.” She grinned. “Just because she has a role to fill, or because she’s *trying her best*, you think that’s reason enough not to challenge the status quo? *Non, non*. That’s unacceptable.”

Slowly, softly, Laplace floated up to the ceiling, her long dark hair billowing around her like she was underwater. Her eyes were shining with determination.

“In case you missed it the first time, allow me to repeat myself. I’m going to punch him in the face, and then I’m going to end his life. *Comprenez-vous?*”

“B-But...”

“*Non, non*. No buts about it! You think you’re safe just because you don’t make waves? Playing nice won’t save you. Trust me, I know.”

“But that’s...”



“Are you hearing me? All it did was create the miserable predicament you find yourself in today. Maxwell helped create a world in which young women are forced to give up their dreams and... and do battle in stripper armor, for crying out loud! It’s time he got his just deserts, don’t you think?”

*Because I sure do.*

“Rest assured, I have absolutely no intention of letting him get away with this.”

“Oh, Laplace,” Tanya sighed as she gazed at the other woman’s beautiful face. Frustratingly beautiful, in fact.

Then she snuck a glance at Arianora and found her staring firmly up at Laplace, refusing to concede. *Man, they really are identical.*

She took in a deep breath and shouted:

*“It’s our job to brave danger! We put the ‘venture’ in ‘adventurer’!”*

Naturally, everyone flinched in surprise.

“Aaaah!”

“Whoa!”

“Good gravy! What’s gotten into you, Tanya?!”

But she ignored them. “You’re coming with us, right, Prin—er, Ari?”

“Huh? Where are we going?”

“To beat the crap out of Maxwell, duh!”

The pink-haired Magi-Knight held out her hand. Arianora and Vis stared at it blankly, then looked up at her.

*“WHAT?!”*

“What on earth are you proposing?!”

They were baffled. What was the significance of this gesture? To them, it was all too foreign.

“Listen up, Ari. We have two options: solve the problem or run away. And neither me nor Laplace is gonna pick the second one.”

*After all, how could we?*

“Remember when I made that big, self-important speech dedicated to ‘all the little girls out there who dream of adventure’?”

“Yeah...?”

“Well, you’re one of them, right?”

At this, Arianora’s eyes widened. All this time, she’d simply accepted the abuse as the way things were—had simply existed to serve her purpose. But this woman standing before her saw her as... a girl with a dream?

“Oh, okay. Now I get it,” Laplace laughed. “Putting the ‘venture’ in ‘adventurer,’ eh? In that case, that would make Ari an adventurer in her own right, wouldn’t you say?”

“Uh...?”

“Think about it! You brought us into your room, told us your biggest secret, and now you’re trying to aid us in our escape!” Laplace nodded to herself, satisfied. “That’s a pretty big venture, don’t you think? You’re not just *dreaming* of adventure; you’re living it!”

The next thing she knew, Arianora had taken Tanya’s hand.

“I, um...”

“Will you take us to Maxwell?” Tanya asked. She nodded firmly.

“You most certainly will not!”

“Vis!”

“If Her Highness must go, then as her attendant, it is only proper that I accompany her!” Vis shouted.

Arianora blinked in surprise. “Y-You can’t, Vis! You...!”

“No, Princess... This responsibility is mine to bear.” Her eyes hardened with determination.

“Oho,” Laplace chuckled. “*D’accord, d’accord*. I get the feeling she won’t take no for an answer, anyway.” She snapped her fingers. “Well, the more the merrier, if you ask me! Are you ready to punch stuff?”

“Darn right!”

“Y-Yeah!”

“Then let’s go.”

In that moment, Laplace grinned like a mischievous little girl... and Arianora found herself entranced.

To her and the rest of the Nameless Girls, Laplace was the Original. And if even *she* wanted to fix her past mistakes... then perhaps Arianora could forge a new life for herself, too.

## 5

Meanwhile, Katherine cursed her own folly.

*Grrr! How could I let myself get distracted by a pretty face?!*

Truth be told, the magic circle at her feet was so advanced, she could scarcely comprehend its structure. All she knew was that it was pinning her feet in place, draining her mana. Before her stood Maxwell, the Mage of legend, looking very pleased with himself.

“Heh heh... I see now... The mana of the albino foxkin... I hadn’t considered it before now. Why, it’s... it’s marvelous!”

Katherine stared back dismally as he chuckled. *Just you wait until I bust out of this trap, buddy.*

He reminded her strongly of one of the regulars at the Little Vixen—a drunken old geezer her grandmother once described as “a sad little man clinging to his former glory.”

*This* was the Court Grand Mage who had sat at the center of the Empire for centuries?

## 6

There was a light snapping sound—and a moment later, all the guards of Ode Castle were fast asleep.

“There we are. That’s one problem we can cross off the list,” Laplace mused to herself.

Meanwhile, Tanya was in awe. *Now there’s a real Sorceress for you—she put the whole castle to sleep! Almost like something out of a fairytale... Actually, now that I think about it, there’s already at least one fairytale that clearly includes her, so I guess that makes sense...*

“Alrighty then, let’s get going!”

And so the four of them—Tanya, Laplace, Arianora, and Vis—descended through the slumbering castle.

“...In the event anyone tries to harm Her Highness, I shall deal with them myself,” Vis declared, holding a short sword at the ready.

Laplace giggled and did an aerial backflip to show off. “You’re the one who chose to tag along with us, so you’re free to do as you like. But let it be known, I’ve already decided I’m going to protect Ari.”

“You presume to refer to her with a nickname? Such insolence!”

“Well, it doesn’t really make sense to call her ‘Princess’ after the conversation we just had, don’t you think? Besides, nicknames are fun.”

“Rrgh... You had better get Her Highness out of this mess. Or I swear to god...”

“Don’t worry, Vis! Lady Laplace is really quite powerful! You’ll see!”

Tanya brought up the tail end of the procession, keeping a watchful eye for any would-be assailants. Come to think of it, she’d taken up the rear a lot of times back when she was in Ryan’s party. Well, except for areas where traps abounded, in which case they suddenly changed their tune to “Ladies first!”

*Man, those guys were such assholes! I hope your teeth fall out, Ryan!!!*

With Arianora leading the way, they soon arrived at a staircase hidden in the dungeons—a staircase that led to Maxwell’s laboratory.

“Oh dear... To think we’d end up going full circle, right back to where we started... I can’t believe I overlooked this,” Laplace sighed.

And so, licking their lips in trepidation, they headed down the spiral staircase.

And after a long, long time... the stairway suddenly opened up.

There, waiting for them, were rows upon rows of glass tanks, a single human figure contained in each one. Some looked identical to Arianora; others had slightly different features.

“Ah, yes... I had a feeling you would come. When I saw you in the arena, I was sure I had to be dreaming, but evidently not... Long time no see, Laplace.”

His soft baritone voice echoed across the laboratory. He sat in the very center, surrounded by tanks on all sides, a king on his throne.



Arianora flinched. “M—I mean—Lord Maxwell...”

Tanya positioned herself in front of the Princess, shielding her. In addition to the tanks, there were dozens of other instruments, the likes of which Tanya had never seen before... but based on the magical mechanisms positioned throughout the room, she could tell at a glance that all of them were used for the extraction and exploitation of other people’s mana. To be clear: deeply forbidden magic.

A chill ran down her spine. What exactly did he do in here? What did he do to this tiny girl every night?

Laplace moved to the forefront of the group, bobbing up and down in midair as she glared at the man before them. Behind her, Tanya stared up at her. *It’s going to be okay, Laplace. We won’t let this creep beat us.*

Then Laplace’s shapely lips parted... and she addressed Maxwell directly.

“You...”

Her crisp, firm voice rang out across the room as she asked—

“Wait, sorry, who are you supposed to be?”

“*WHAT?!* ” Tanya shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Gah! Tanya, will you calm down?!”

*After what you just said?! I think I have the right to be a little confused! Do we have the wrong guy or something?! Hello?!*

“What’s going on? I don’t understand... Is that not Maxwell?”

Puzzled, Laplace tilted her head. “I mean, judging from his mana, it’s definitely him, but... I’m afraid I don’t recognize him at all. Last time we saw him, at the arena, I didn’t really get a good look at him, so I simply assumed... but this? *Non, non!* The Maxwell I remember wasn’t this handsome! And is it just me, or does he look a little *too* young?”

While the Maxwell she remembered was fairly gifted as a Mage, frankly speaking, he was leagues away from anything even in the ballpark of “handsome.” After all, it had taken a large sum of money in order to acquire a

descendant of the Dragon God as his wife. In addition, something about the way he carried himself just radiated creeper vibes.

Then he began to laugh.

“Heh heh... pffhaha! Hahaha!!! Oh, how very *human* you’ve become, my sweet Laplace. Is it not only natural for one’s appearance to change over time? But... I suppose you didn’t get the memo, hmm?” Maxwell(?) chuckled, seemingly in spite of himself.

Meanwhile, Tanya was starting to panic. *Seriously, what if we got the wrong guy? We can’t risk hurting an innocent man! Wait...* She’d realized something. *Have I... seen this guy somewhere before?*

“Um... L-Lord Maxwell... He...” Arianora began in a trembling voice.

“Foolish little girl, surely we needn’t tell the whole world.”

“Man, where have I seen him before...? Oh!”

“Perhaps it is time I shed this form. It was only meant to be temporary, after all.”

“What?!” At this, Tanya suddenly remembered where she recognized Maxwell’s face. “That’s right! Weren’t you at the Sparring Tournament last year?!”

“...I don’t know. Was he? Heh heh... Normally I keep the face hidden with a mask or a cloak, but I daresay this reaction is entertaining.”

“I knew it! That’s the star of last year’s winning team!”

Last year, Tanya had participated in the Sparring Tournament with Ryan and the rest of their party—and this man had been there, too. As she recalled, he had demonstrated extraordinary strength in the championship round singles match. Yes... This smirking man sitting before them was the spitting image of that competitor.

At one point she’d noticed that he’d stopped coming by the Adventurer’s Guild... but thinking back, there were rumors that his reward for winning the Tournament was a cushy job at the Imperial Court...

“What’s going on...?” she murmured to herself, perplexed. Had Maxwell



entered the Tournament under a fake name?

“Oh, I see now,” Laplace mused under her breath. “I *knew* you couldn’t possibly be immortal, you rat bastard. You’ve abandoned your own body, haven’t you?”

“What? Abandoned... his *body*?!”

“*Oui, oui*. He looks nothing like the man I remember... which can only mean he’s been transferring his soul from body to body, like a hermit crab. How uninspired.”

Instantly, the man’s shrill laughter pierced the air. “Hahahaha! Close, but no cigar! Do you really think I wasted these last 300 years researching hackneyed old transmigration magic and nothing else?”

Just then, Tanya spotted a figure behind Maxwell:

“What the... Katherine?!”

“You’re kidding!”

A foxkin Mage lay unconscious, hands and feet bound together, in the center of a magic circle. It was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, their good friend Katherine.

“Oho! So you *do* know each other... This albino foxkin mana is simply exquisite, I must say. I’d heard rumors that one who consumed beastkin mana would be possessed by fox spirits, but in actuality it seems rather compatible with the humanoid form. Fits like a glove.”

“*Mon dieu*—you’re *draining her mana*?! Stop that at once!”

Laplace was viscerally reminded of the plot Maxwell had once hatched—to absorb mana from unsuspecting civilians using a large number of cursed orichalcum coins. This was, of course, the very same plot that Laplace foiled, only to be thanked by getting sealed away for 300 years.

The human body could only withstand so much mana exhaustion. In the early stages, the victim would merely fall unconscious, but further depletion could result in permanent physical impairment and even death.

This despicable man had tried to drain mana from the most populated city on

the continent, all to further his own immortality. Fortunately his plans were dashed, and the cursed coins were relegated to mere paperweights gathering dust on antique store shelves... but his obsession never faded. Why was he so desperate, to the point that he'd abandon his own body?

Maxwell smirked at them.

“With this, I can finally complete the perfect Bride!”

## Chapter 7: Lilium Strikes Back

### 1

“Here’s a little story you can take with you to the afterlife,” Maxwell began, his eyes gleaming darkly.

Once upon a time, 300 years ago, back when Maxwell was in his prime... the war-torn empire of Pajan was nearly unrecognizable.

Back then, women and men alike held jobs and titles of equal importance. Each person made a living on the merit of their own achievements. If one were to dig through the old, yellowed documents stored within Ode Castle, one would surely find records of female Guildmasters and Court Mages... not that those files were available to the general public, of course.

At the time, Maxwell was a painfully mediocre man. He had the track record—and the pedigree—to earn himself a spot among the Court Mages, but when contrasted with their talent and genius, he came out looking awfully average.

Cliché as it was, the pursuit of immortality was his life’s work, but his research was going nowhere. In contrast, the other Court Mages all had titles like “Sorceress” or “Wizard” and could cast spells without incantations. They were hailed as heroes on the battlefield; Maxwell was a nobody. And so the war waged on and on... and in the meantime, he pretended not to notice the desperate desire growing in his gut.

Then, one day, Maxwell noticed that all the most successful Court Mages had one thing in common: they were all working in weapons development, crafting spells that even ordinary Mages could use—anything to give the Pajamese foot soldiers even a tiny bit more strength. Their work was focused entirely on the war.

Then Maxwell started thinking.

Immortality was basically a form of body modification. If he could create a powerful, autonomous super-soldier that was guaranteed never to turn on them—that was sure to get him noticed. And for an under-achiever like Maxwell, this was an enticing prospect.

First, he would need a superior specimen to serve as his test subject. To that end, he began to search for people with a naturally high capacity for mana... but he needed someone who lacked agency. Someone who wouldn't rebel against him. A short while later, he realized: *of course*. He could just create that person himself.

And so Maxwell decided to get married. His bride-to-be: a shrine maiden who served at a temple that worshipped the Dragon God. Once the marriage had been arranged, a young woman descended from the sacred mountain a few weeks later to meet him. She had long, silky black hair, porcelain skin, and icy, almond-shaped eyes. But most importantly, she was possessed of an extremely high mana capacity. After all, she was a high-ranked shrine maiden, said to be a descendant of the Dragon God himself.

Maxwell had used his status as a Court Mage, his wit, his wealth, and his connections, to acquire her. And with the current political climate as a convenient excuse, he succeeded in marrying her. The mountain had been forced to give her up in exchange for their continued autonomy as an independent state.

Maxwell reveled in his own omnipotence. Through many years of being a nobody, his ego had taken a beating. But now he had a trophy wife that he could use as he saw fit. Every night, he took her to bed with one order: *bear my child*.

That was all he wanted from her—an innocent, untainted child that carried the blood of the Dragon God in its veins. Using that child, he would create the ultimate super-soldier and seize all the glory for himself.

But their marriage was a short one. After their daughter was born, Maxwell's wife left him. She had to return to the temple, or so she claimed. But they both knew it was just an excuse.

Everyone around him laughed at him for having lost the perfect woman... and

Maxwell found this humiliation hard to bear. So he vowed to himself: in place of the wife who had abandoned him, he would create the perfect daughter. A daughter who would obey him—who would never betray him.

## 2

“Laplace... I gave you everything. I taught you all the magic I could, right from an early age. Then I enhanced your body so you could wield it. And as a result, *you* acquired immortality—the very thing *I* so desperately sought as a Mage! You wouldn’t be the person you are today without me!” Maxwell roared. “One would think you’d show a little gratitude, but no—you always looked at me with nothing but resentment in your eyes! And you had such a rebellious attitude!”

“Uh huh...”

“I was wrong. I never should have let a woman wield power! That’s why you never learned to respect your father!”

“...Uh huh...”

Indeed, not only was Maxwell abandoned by his wife, but his beloved daughter treated him with barely-concealed contempt. For the life of him, he just couldn’t understand *why*. As the days wore on, his paranoia deepened... and eventually, he became convinced that it was their strength and intelligence that was to blame.

“I will create the perfect Bride—a powerful, loyal, obedient Bride. That has always been my dream... Hasn’t it, Laplace?”

“You’re sick...”

“To that end, I have crafted and incubated vessels of all kinds, all different races, all different bloodlines. I was told to spare no expense—we were at war, after all. As long as it served my country, I could do anything I wanted and get away with it! I was a hero!”

His expression was one of ecstasy as he confessed to his sins.

“For 300 years, I tried to recreate you—or rather, a more obedient version of you. But no matter what I did, it just didn’t work! Each one I made was nothing

but a drastically inferior version of you, or your mother. And so now I'm convinced: for an immortal bride, I need your blood. I need the mana of the Dragon God!"

He chuckled.

"I've been waiting for this moment for a long, long time."

His lips curled into a smirk... and Tanya realized what was about to happen.

"Look out!"

But it was too late. A magic circle expanded beneath them.

"Nnngghhh...! What... spell is this...?!"

She fell to her knees as the strength faded from her body. Glancing around, she could see Laplace, Arianora, and Vis all topple to the ground, unable to stand. *He's... draining... our mana...!*

Maxwell let out a maniacal laugh. "Heh heh... Hahahaha! Yes! Truth be told, all I needed was Laplace, but... I must say, you ladies are all fine specimens in your own right!"

He smiled to himself, entranced, as he gazed at a nearby measuring device. Meanwhile, the little girls in the tanks all around them—the "vessels"—began to grow in response to the mana funneled into them. Bubbles rose from their lips, as though they were starting to breathe.

"Wonderful... So many Brides, all brimming with the utmost respect for me! Sadly, I was forced to part ways with Arianora in order to win points with the royal family, but... No, I mustn't let any of them have their own identity. That was where I went wrong with you, Laplace... I still regret the way you turned out."

Tanya tried to challenge this... but her voice wouldn't come. She couldn't speak.

"If only I could have beaten it out of you, right from the start. That way you couldn't resent me."

In his mind, a proper woman was subservient above all else. *Fuck that.*

“But, seeing as I have such a fine collection of vessels here... once they awaken as Brides, I’ll do them all a favor and erase their identities. Then they’ll be perfect.” His lips curled in a sinister smile. “I’m going to make you all very happy.”

Then he strolled forward, grabbed Arianora by the arm, and dragged her out of the magic circle. She let out a piercing scream.

“With your intellect and mana capacity, you are my true masterpiece... How I regret letting you act as the princess.”

Vis gasped audibly. “Your Highness!” she shouted, reaching with all her might in Arianora’s direction.

“Hmph... You’ve outlived your usefulness, you mewling quim. Die!”

He delivered a hard kick to her stomach, then turned back to Arianora with a smile.

“Now then, let’s put you back into your tank. That way we can erase all those pesky memories and return you to a soulless vessel. Once I complete my army of loyal soldiers, we will have no further need of this country.”

His enraptured gaze wasn’t looking at her, but to something beyond.

“We can live somewhere quiet—on a distant mountaintop, perhaps. Yes, it’s high time the Court Grand Mage got to spend a peaceful life of retirement with his Brides and beloved daughter...”

Tanya shuddered. What she sensed from his smile was... *affection*. He sincerely believed that women—or perhaps all people excluding himself—were better off without an identity of their own.

“Dis...gusting...!” she spat, fighting against the nauseating sensation of mana being siphoned from her body.

At this, Maxwell’s expression clouded over. “Excuse me?”

“I said... you’re disgusting! You keep... talking about people like they’re... *objects*! Even your own... daughter!”

Maxwell laughed coldly. “Yes, well, objects don’t rebel.”

“Fuck you...!”

And then Tanya heaved herself to her feet.

She could feel her bones creaking as every joint in her body resisted. Truth be told, her mana levels were so low, she wanted nothing more than to collapse to the floor and pass out, as Vis and Arianora had. But no. She was going to stand up.

Meanwhile, Maxwell stared down at her. “Oho. Getting back up, are we?”

She glared at him. *Just wait until I wipe that stupid smirk off your face.*

There were so many little girls out there dreaming of adventure—she couldn’t let them down. She had to keep fighting for them. For Arianora.

“Tanya...!” Laplace wheezed, breathing heavily.

“Hi, Laplace,” Tanya grinned.

Judging from the way Laplace was sprawled out on the floor, she suspected that this particular spell was increasingly more effective on those with larger capacities for mana. But that was no excuse.

“Tell me, Great Sorceress... is that all you’ve got?” she declared.

At this, Laplace burst out laughing. Her smile was pure and unwavering.

Without her mana, she couldn’t levitate like she usually did, but nevertheless

—

“Nnnrrgghh... *Non... non...* Tanya... You’d do well... not to underestimate me!”

—she pushed herself up onto her feet. On behalf of her younger self—who hadn’t been strong enough to stand up to him—she was going to make a stand.

“We’re not in trouble yet! This isn’t even my final form... I still have 530,000 more phases to go!”

### 3

*Why?*

Maxwell clenched his jaw. 300 years ago, despite the lethargic resentment in



her eyes, his daughter Laplace had carried out his orders without complaint. Why now, of all times, did she glare at him with such spirited resistance?

For 300 years, he had worked to defang the women of this country. First he sealed the Great Sorceress away; then he built a system that would rob women of opportunities for advancement and funnel them into Healer jobs. He made ineffective armor the standard. All so they could never mock him again.

Meanwhile, he spent 300 years exchanging a series of (conventionally attractive) bodies in order to advance his agenda as Court Grand Mage. And yet... the women before him *still* had the strength to rise up against him. Why? Why did they glare at him like that?

“Impertinent whores!”

He raised his hand high, increasing the output on the mana siphoning spell. They could try to resist all they wanted, but they were still trapped in his magic circle. Like caged birds, all they could do was stay put and wait to die.

*I'll sit back and watch the agony on their faces as I drain every last drop of their mana. I'm sure Laplace will survive it—and as for these other women, who cares?*

“Die!”

But just as he was about to bring his hand down—

“Forgetting something?” asked a voice behind him. A female voice.

It was the foxkin Mage.

“Take this! **Fox-Fireball!!!**”

As a shower of pale blue fireballs rained down upon him, he could make out a second figure standing beside the foxkin: the lavender-haired girl who had escaped earlier. He began to panic. How had she crept up on him? He hadn't sensed her approaching at all!

“Katherine! Nadine!” Tanya exclaimed.

“Seriously, you guys totally forgot about us, didn't you?” Katherine laughed.

And though her mana was still being drained away, it was a laugh Tanya

managed to return in kind. “Okay, you’re right! I kinda did! I’m so sorry!!!”

“Figured as much! But that’s okay, since it worked out in our favor!”

Indeed, they’d caught Maxwell entirely off-guard. He was so distracted by Tanya and Laplace that he’d forgotten—no, simply turned his attention away from—the foxkin. And this tiny mistake was more than enough to upset him.

“Rrgh... *How?! This spell is supposed to grow in strength the higher the subject’s level! You shouldn’t even be able to touch it!*” he snapped.

“Yes, well... I’m Level 3,” Nadine muttered as she helped Katherine stay upright.

“What?!”

She laughed softly. “I’m only a Level 3 Healer, so I guess I must not be the target demographic for this spell.”

Indeed, Nadine registered at Level 3—as a Healer, anyway. And if the spell primarily preyed upon those with more advanced mana circuitry and storage capacity, then it was little wonder it hardly affected her at all.

As for her other class, Assassin, her abilities were honed purely through effort. No matter how high her level, those skills would never be drained away, least of all through her mana.

“Impossible! You snuck into the imperial castle... at *Level 3?!!*”

“I’m afraid so. You see, while I may only be Level 3, I’m still Liliu’s Healer. And as it happens, stealth is my forte.”

Behind her lenses, there was a dangerous glint in her eyes.

Once again, Tanya found herself thinking: *Remind me never to underestimate a Healer again!*

Meanwhile, Katherine grinned to herself. She’d trusted that Nadine would be able to get them out of this, and sure enough, she was right. With Nadine’s help, she’d managed to unleash a Fox-Fireball attack with what little mana she still possessed.

Somehow, Katherine Foxxi had known that the woman who had bested her in

the Sparring Tournament would find a way to turn this whole thing around. And thanks to Nadine, they'd successfully pulled one over on none other than the *Court Grand Mage*.

Her heart fluttered in her chest. *What an adventure.*

"How's it feel to get tricked by a fox?!" she shouted.

"Serves you right!" Nadine chimed in.

Quietly, Katherine patted herself on the back for keeping quiet. "This makes twice you've saved my ass!"

At this, Nadine smiled... and flung a throwing knife from her dainty little hand.

"Wha...?!"

"Oh, how I love a good surprise attack!"

Maxwell flinched as it grazed his cheek—and embedded itself into the magic circle on the floor behind him, cutting off the flow of mana.

The power of any given spell was in the circuitry, and magic circles were designed to bolster those circuits. Cut off the flow, and... well... in terms of human biology, the effect was similar to slashing someone's carotid artery.

With the magic circle rendered ineffective, the agonizing mana drain ceased its torment on Tanya and the others.

"Ridiculous!"

Maxwell swiftly reached out his hand. In the next instant, Arianora's unconscious body floated into the air and moved over to him.

"Unfortunately for you, I've already acquired the minimum threshold of mana I need!"

Beneath them, the magic circle faded.

"You're not getting away with this! Let her go, Maxwell!" Tanya roared.

Maxwell flinched slightly in the face of her unbridled rage, but quickly recovered. "Curses... No, it doesn't matter. Take care of them for me, my beloved daughters."

He raised his cape like a shield.

“Teleportation magic?! Stop him!” Tanya shouted.

Then she heard Laplace snap her fingers and heaved a sigh of relief. After all, Laplace could make anything happen. Sure, she’d forbidden herself from using attack magic, but that didn’t matter. She could use the stone paving and... and...

“...Huh?” Tanya blinked in confusion. “Wait, what?”

Until now, that familiar *snap* had always solved their problems... but this time, nothing happened.

“This can’t be happening...” Laplace muttered, defeated.

But sadly, Maxwell was already long gone.

## 4

A scream echoed through the laboratory:

“WHY THIS?!?!?”

The four women of Lilium were surrounded by dozens of little girls, all with murderous intent.

After Maxwell had vanished, the glass tanks all suddenly shattered, and out crawled a whole bunch of girls, each with a soulless look in their eyes that suggested they were ready to kill.

“There’s so many! Wh... What do we do...?!?” shouted Nadine, whose Assassin skillset was decidedly *not* geared toward fighting a large number of opponents at the same time.

Maxwell’s so-called “Brides” were artificial life-forms robbed of all agency, and as such, they moved like puppets as they closed in to attack.

“What the heck *are* these things?! Zombies or something?!” Katherine shrieked.

Admittedly their sluggish, lifeless gait *was* fairly reminiscent of the undead. But unlike any ordinary zombies—

“What the?! Did they just use Thunderbolt?!” Katherine shouted, blonde hair swaying, as a low crackle rent the air. “No incantation?! You gotta be freakin’ kidding me!”

While the spell itself was fairly basic, the Brides could cast it with startling accuracy... and with only a single snap of their tiny fingers. Just like Laplace.

“Uh, guys?”

Katherine glanced around the room. Girls, girls, girls, as far as the eye could see—each of them mistreated at the hands of Maxwell.

“Are we really supposed to attack them?!”

## 5

As a party, Liliu had purposely avoided causing harm to the innocent during their quests. This wasn’t a hard rule they’d agreed upon in advance; to them, it was just the right thing to do. And despite their hostile intentions, these artificial puppet girls were still innocent victims.

“Nngh... Aria...nora...!” Vis groaned from the floor.

“Vis! Are you awake?” Tanya asked as she knelt down and lifted the princess’s attendant into a sitting position.

The woman looked completely drained. No surprise there, of course, since royal attendants weren’t generally trained for combat.

Tanya lifted her into her arms. If nothing else, she wanted to rescue at least *one* person. But everywhere she looked, they were surrounded by electrified Brides. Katherine was shielding them for now, but her mana was just as limited as everyone else’s.

They were running out of time, and they needed to do something—fast.

“We need to get Vis on her feet again.”

“I... I’ll heal her!”

Nadine jogged over and started to cast Heal. Naturally, she was Level 3, so this was incredibly ineffective.

“...Thank you for trying...” Vis wheezed. Tears filled Nadine’s eyes.

“D-Don’t let it get you down, Nadine!”

“I... I’m sorry... I’m so sorry... If only I wasn’t Level 3...!” *I promise I’ll be more of a Healer next time*, she vowed to herself silently.

“The... clock tower...”

“What was that, Vis?”

In spite of her pained, ragged breathing, Vis struggled to get the message to Tanya regardless.

“I think he... he took the princess to the clock tower!”

## 6

Suppose, for a moment, that one of the people here had grown up helping their family run a tavern. Suppose they were a master of cooking... and all the other skills that came with it. Would they be useful in a situation like this one?

The answer... is a resounding *yes*.

“What’s the key to good cooking?”

Katherine swung her staff. On command, a flurry of tiny Fox-Fireballs shot forward, striking the Brides.

One would think their petite, naked forms would be burned to a crisp as a result, and yet—

“Heat control!”

The fireballs moved carefully, striking the Brides with precision to keep them from casting... but their skin remained unburned, their bones unbroken. The Fox-Fireballs were perfectly controlled bursts, their only intended function was to knock the Brides off-balance.

Heat control, indeed.

“You’re amazing, Katherine! A true master chef!”

“This is no time for jokes, Nadine! Protect that chick in white!”

She was, of course, referring to Vis, who was struggling to stand, but clearly lacked the energy to do so. She had lost a critical amount of mana, but regardless—

“H-Hurry... Please... Save the princess...!”

“Vis!”

“You can’t stay here, Tanya!” shouted Nadine.

“Don’t worry—we can buy you some time to escape, no problem! Now take Laplace and get going to that clock tower or whatever!” Katherine chimed in.

Their expressions were firm and resolute... and Tanya could tell that they had the utmost faith in her.

“Let’s go, Laplace,” she muttered quietly.

The Great Sorceress nodded and rose to her feet. At this, Tanya gasped.

*She’s... standing?*

Normally Laplace would always complain about foot pain and insist on levitating, but right now, both feet were planted firmly on the ground.

“Laplace...? You’re not going to levitate?”

“*C’est exact*. That rat bastard took all my mana.”

Her legs shook like a newborn fawn’s... but nevertheless, she held her own.

“But I don’t need to fly. I’ll run. Hell, I’ll even walk there if I have to. Because Maxwell is going down.”

## Chapter 8: Laplace's Revenge

### 1

Meanwhile, at the top of the clock tower, Maxwell sneered down at the city below.

“Destiny waits for no man, it seems.”

Soon... Soon he would take control of Ode—no, the entire empire. He had waited 300 long years for this.

In the beginning, he only wished to better himself. That ambition had turned to self-pity as he spent more and more time wallowing in his failures. Then it turned to resentment, directed at the women who had abandoned him. And then... and then... and then...

He could no longer tell what it was he hated, or why exactly he was doing this. All he knew was that he despised women. Women like the shrine maiden of the White Dragon, his wife, who left him. Women like his daughter, Laplace.

He wanted to take their power away—force them to serve him and only him. That way he could finally get the happy ending he deserved... or so he believed. To that end, he abandoned his body... abandoned his heart...

Now he couldn't even remember what his face had originally looked like.

“Now then, Arianora. It's time for you to be crowned Queen,” he whispered sweetly to the unconscious artificial girl in his arms.

At this very moment, back in the laboratory, the Brides were operating on autopilot like mindless zombies. Their only objective: to destroy Maxwell's enemies. And in order to perfect this loyal army, he would need to create a Queen—a control tower that would command the rest of the nameless swarm. She would serve as his pawn, and when the time came to take over the country, she would exist to garner the support of the citizens. Fortunately for him, she was already a well-liked princess.



As an individual, she was an excellent specimen. It would be all too easy for him to rewrite her thoughts and emotions. Like the other Brides, she existed only to serve him without question—just as Laplace herself once had. And once she was Queen, his dream would be realized.

“Initiate Queenmaker ritual,” he growled. “Begin mana transfer.”

At his words... the entire city of Ode began to glow faintly.

“Beautiful... A job well done, even if it took me an eternity.” He chuckled to himself.

He had spent the past 300 years imbuing every inch of Ode with his magic. The churches, the fountains, the flowerbeds—each was a functional piece of his magical formula, he’d turned the city itself into one colossal magic circle.

Maxwell was delirious with joy. Soon... Soon it would all be his...

But just then, a voice echoed across the clock tower—the voice of the one who had chosen to defy him.

“MAAAAXWELLLLL!!!”

“...It’s not very ladylike to raise your voice, Laplace.”

He turned. The only way she could have got up here was by climbing the long spiral staircase leading to the roof. And sure enough, standing in the doorway to the stairwell— “Let... Let go of her, Maxwell!”

—was Laplace, her feet bleeding from the soles. Standing beside her to keep her upright was the Magi-Knight, her pale pink hair fluttering in the wind.

“Go get him, Laplace! Kick his ass!”

At this, Maxwell let out a laugh. There stood his daughter, the look in her eyes just as rebellious as it was 300 years ago, and now some stupid dyke had tagged along, too.

“You think you can stop me with those artificial talents of yours?”

“Artificial...?”

“That’s right. Nothing about you is *natural*, Laplace!” he roared.

Every strength she had was given to her by Maxwell himself... and now she

was trying to bite the very hand that had fed her. *Unacceptable.*

“Your talents are all artificial—I’m the one who embedded them into your blood. Your abilities are unnatural—they don’t belong to you, *I* gave them to you. And now you’re gripped by artificial desires as well. You were never supposed to turn against me, your own father!”

Maxwell shook with rage and thought, *You stupid inhuman wench!*

“And this... this *anger* you feel toward me isn’t yours, either! It’s merely borrowed!”

“...What?”

“That Knight woman—she’s turned you against me! I raised you to be a good girl, and now you’ve let someone else convince you I’m the bad guy!”

At this, Tanya felt something rise up from the pit of her stomach.

“...Hey, Laplace?”

“Hee hee... What is it, Tanya?” Laplace asked, trying (and failing) to keep a straight face.

After everything he just said, she was convinced anew: *This asshole doesn’t know a single thing about me.*

“MAXWELL!!!”

She was never the type to scream... and yet her roar echoed across the clock tower.

“Listen up, because I’m only going to explain this once!”

*I admit, I was inspired by Tanya and her fury on the day we met... but still...*

“The only person who ‘convinced’ me to be angry... was ME! NO ONE ELSE! MY EMOTIONS ARE *MINE!*”

Her emotions. Her anger. Her body. Her strength. All of it—*all of it*—was hers.

“You have NO right to call me ‘artificial’ when YOU’RE the one who made me that way! You *hypocrite!*”

She balled her hands into fists.

“So there you have it.”

She glared directly into her father’s eyes.

“I’m going to destroy you—*right here, right now!*”

## 2

“I wish they’d at least put some clothes on,” Nadine muttered.

“Wh... Nadine! Don’t slut-shame them!”

This comment struck Katherine as a little harsh, considering they were already being forced to fight the poor little things.

Fortunately, the albino foxkin tribe was among the most skilled of beastkin at using the secret arts. And with her perfectly heat-controlled Fox-Fireballs, she could keep the damage she caused to a minimum. But the downside to heat control was that it required more focus than going full-blast... *Yeah, this would be a lot easier if they had armor on.*

“Ugh... I hate to say it, but... I’m not gonna last much longer...!”

Maxwell’s spell had drained her mana just a few hours earlier, so she was already dangerously low—and now she was scraping the bottom of the barrel. She gritted her teeth. *God, I’m totally going to pass out.*

Right as her legs buckled, however, Nadine swooped in and seized her by the arm, holding her upright. The slight chill of her palm felt nice against her skin.

“Are you alright, Katherine?”

“Yeah... This is nothing...”

“Glad to hear it. Of course, I would have expected no less from an honor student like yourself.”

“...Is that sarcasm?”

“Perish the thought! I honestly find you impressive, Katherine... Now then, it’s time to begin.”

“Begin what?”

Nadine crouched down low. In her hand was a leather satchel—a farewell present from Laplace given right before she and Tanya left the laboratory: “*C’est pour toi*, Nadine. A little gift from the Great Sorceress.”

Inside, the satchel was chock-full of gold coins.

“Are those... Laplace’s Orichalcum Coins or whatever?”

Indeed they were.

She remembered that day back at the Little Vixen, when they’d told her about the “mysterious thief” who had stolen the orichalcum coins from all the local magic supply stores.

“Wait, so... *Laplace* stole them?!”

“Who knows. But to be fair, they’re called *Laplace’s* Orichalcum Coins, are they not? She can’t exactly steal what’s already hers.”

“Is... Is that how that works...?”

“It’s a legal loophole,” Nadine grinned. Despite her meek, unassuming appearance, she had the tendency to drop some delightful bombshells.

Smiling, Katherine sighed and swung her staff, unleashing another round of Fox-Fireballs that kept the Brides at bay and interrupted their wordless spellcasting.

“So she wants us to slap those coins on these naughty little girls? Fine by me! Not that I get why, but whatever!”

“I can’t say I understand it myself, but... right now, all we can do is trust her. Alright... Here I go!”

And with that, Nadine shot forward, gracefully weaving between the Brides like a dancer, her presence carefully masked as she taped an orichalcum coin to each of the girls using the only adhesive a Healer came equipped with: bandages. This was a feat only a former Assassin could have hoped to pull off.

“Ugh!” Katherine growled in frustration as she cast another wave of fireballs.

*I guess it’s up to me to provide cover fire, then!*

"Surrender now, and I'll see that you receive preferential treatment during my reign as dictator. For example, you could be my slave-in-chief."

*"Non, non.* Hard pass... For that matter, dare I ask what a 'slave-in-chief' is supposed to even mean?"

Atop the clock tower, Maxwell smirked, feeling secure in his victory.

"Hah... Foolish woman."

He could feel an entire city's worth of mana filling his body, granting him power beyond measure. As a fairly run-of-the-mill Mage (give or take the body-swapping that had kept him alive for an eternity), this was power the likes of which he had never felt before.

He raised his arms high into the air—

"Then take this! **Firestorm!**"

—and swung them down, summoning a veritable tornado of hot flame that engulfed Tanya and Laplace.

"Nngh...!"

Firestorm was always an advanced-level spell, but at Maxwell's current power level, its strength had magnified tenfold. He reeled, in love with his own omnipotence. He had already drained Laplace of all her mana back in the underground laboratory; after all, the spell he used had been designed to absorb her mana specifically. She couldn't possibly survive this attack.

"Heh heh... Hahaha... Oh, Laplace, you didn't stand a—wha?!"

But when the dust settled, two figures remained standing.

"Hey, so, uh... was that actually Firestorm?" asked the one with the pink hair.

Unfortunately for Maxwell, he had made one grave miscalculation.

"Because it seemed a lot more like a beginner-level spell. Are you sure it wasn't just Fireball?"

These were no ordinary Mages.

“Just kidding!”

“What...?!”

“Now then, I think it’s time for me to bust out my fancy sword and get to work!”

“Sword?! Where did *that* come from?! You didn’t have any sword earlier!”

Maxwell stared in shock. Meanwhile, the golden ring on Tanya’s finger sparkled in the light.

This woman—Tanya Artemiciov—had imbued her sword with Water Magic in order to block his Firestorm. This was the warrior who fought in his daughter’s name.

“Damnit...!”

Maxwell, the Court Grand Mage. Granted, yes, he was a garbage human being, but he was more cunning than he let on, and he wasn’t altogether incompetent with battle magic. Definitely not to be underestimated, or so Tanya had decided. In which case— “We’re going to defeat you—whatever it takes!”

*Because that’s all there is to it.*

“...Hey, Laplace?”

“Hmm? What is it, Tanya?”

“You’re hiding something from me, aren’t you?”

“...What makes you say that?”

It all started the day they first met. *I can’t use any of my attack spells*, Laplace had told her, thereby forcing Tanya to have to defeat the Wyvern single-handedly. Then Laplace stole a kiss from her to awaken within her the power of a Magi-Knight... or so she claimed.

Normally Tanya would have complained about the non-consensual nature of the situation... but her lips were so sweet, she just couldn’t complain.

“Why would I hide something from you?” Laplace asked, wearing her usual relaxed grin. Meanwhile, the soles of her feet were still bleeding, unused to

walking directly on the stone pavement.

Laplace almost never lost her calm, cheerful composure. She was so strong.

“You actually *can* use your attack spells—you just *choose* not to. Isn’t that right?” Tanya asked.

At this, Laplace’s shapely lips curled in a perfect crescent.

“...Remember how you gave me a portion of your mana?” Tanya continued.

Magi-Knight: a master-level class that combined sword skills with magic. Unlike Mages, however, Magi-Knights could circulate mana directly into their sword to cast, no incantation required. Plus, with elemental attribute magic serving as stat buffs, Tanya was essentially “a Mage who could punch people”—and she was nigh unstoppable.

But wasn’t it all sort of... too good to be true?

Could a single kiss really streamline her mana circuits and upgrade her to a Magi-Knight, totally for free? Surely not... unless, for example, she had just been lent power, power equal to that of an ancient, mythical Great Sorceress.

“What gave it away, Tanya?”

“Back when that magic circle was draining us...”

“Hmm?”

“It just kept draining and draining and draining... almost like there was a *lot* more inside me than I remembered having.”

Laplace’s mana was etched into her blood. Hence, it was pretty much impossible to transfer it to another person. But through contact with their mucous membranes, one could lend their mana to a recipient—for example, the exchange of saliva through a kiss.

“And I always wondered why you kept trying to kiss me at any given moment!”

“Hee hee... Looks like the cat’s out of the bag. But before you judge me, do try to put yourself in my shoes. Can you really blame me for taking an interest in a hard worker like yourself?” Laplace smiled softly.

“Laplace...”

“Listen closely, Tanya. I’m going to draw his attention to buy you some time. I need you to get out of here before his spell activates and starts draining the whole city’s—mmmmph?!”

Her eyes widened in surprise as she felt something soft touch her lips. Then she saw strands of pale pink hair and realized that Tanya had seized her by the front of her dress and pulled her in for a kiss. A long kiss.

All this time, Tanya had always thought of Laplace as too physically affectionate. She would always spring kisses on Tanya, be it when they were drunk, late at night, or in the middle of the afternoon. But looking back, what she was really doing was topping up Tanya’s mana so she could keep using her Magi-Knight abilities.

“Haah... There. You can have your mana back now, Laplace.”

Of course, Laplace had only performed these transfers because she was absolutely confident in Tanya’s magical prowess. After all, it was the mana of a Great Sorceress. A lesser Mage might lose control of it and endanger themselves.

And that trust meant the world to Tanya.

She pulled away and gazed into the eyes of her partner in crime.

“I want you to punch him with your own two fists!”

The mana from inside her body—a mingled fusion of Laplace’s mana and her own—was now inside Laplace.

Slowly, softly, Laplace began to float into the air. Her long dark hair billowed around her as if she were underwater.

“Now then... I think it’s high time you gave me back my sweet little adopted sisterrrr!” she declared in a singsong voice as she savored the feeling of the mana swirling around inside her.

Granted, this was just a drop in the bucket compared to the inexhaustible stockpile she was used to... but to Laplace, it felt more like Tanya had lent her



the freedom to express her rage. And that thought made her heart flutter in her chest.

“You whelp! You still seek to oppose me?!”

“*Oui, oui.*”

For Arianora and the injustice she’d suffered. For Tanya, who never gave up on her. But most of all... for herself and her long-suppressed anger. She would be *unstoppable*.

“Just warning you, but... at the moment, I’m afraid I can’t use anything *but* attack spells! I hope you’re prepared!”

## 4

What Maxwell witnessed next was incredible—the work of a true genius.

Even after a full 300 years, he still hadn’t caught up to his daughter in terms of sheer ability; he wasn’t stupid enough to pretend otherwise. Painful as it was, he had to admit it. After all...

“Nnngghh...! Damn it... Goddamn it!!!”

“Hahaha! Frustration is a look you wear well. *C’est magnifique!*”

She didn’t take even a single step—she just snapped her fingers.

“Blast it all... There’s so much blood...!”

“Yeah, it really hurts to lose an arm, huh? Happened to me *alllll* the time back in the day.”

Indeed, Maxwell’s arm was gone—literally erased from existence.

Laplace had cast Photon, a beginner-level Light Magic attack spell. Normally all it did was illuminate the area or blind the enemy—or if you were *really* lucky, inflict a tiny scrape.

“But that was hardly the worst thing you did to me. Think of all the other awful shit you did!”

“Nngh...!”

Drunk on revenge, her beautiful countenance was tinged with joy.

“Now for the other one!”

There was a light, airy *pop* as Maxwell’s other arm vanished without a trace.

“AAAAAAGGGHHH!”

Meanwhile, Tanya couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Laplace’s Photon spell had exceeded the realm of possibility. She was just *that damn powerful*.

Now that she’d returned the mana Laplace had previously lent her, Tanya’s was running on fumes. For someone who had trained as hard as Tanya had, however, this wasn’t a huge issue—she could still cast two or three more beginner-level spells. And if at any point it looked like Laplace needed backup, Tanya was prepared to pull out all the stops.

However...

“I don’t think we want Arianora to see this.”

Tanya darted forward, past the all-powerful Sorceress, past the armless and bloody Maxwell, and scooped up the princess’s limp body. For once, she was grateful that Arianora was unconscious.

“Wouldn’t want to set a bad example for her, y’know.”

Tanya and Laplace were both prepared to torture this man to death... but just then, his lips twisted in a stiff smile.

“Ohhh...! My ultimate spell has activated...!”

And the next thing they heard was a series of wet popping sounds that made their skin crawl.

“Ew! Gross!”

Maxwell’s flesh was wriggling and swelling—regrowing his lost limbs like he was some kind of lizard. Needless to say, it wasn’t pleasant to witness.

“Heh heh... HAH HAH HAH! It appears you’re too late. All the city’s mana is now mine! No matter how you may wound me, you will only be wasting your time. I shall regenerate as many times as it takes! No one will ever laugh at me again... With this, I am the ultimate life-form! Immortality is MINE!”

His body began to glow faintly, brimming with the mana from all the people of Ode. He was appropriating their life force, all to sate his own greed.

“If that isn’t wasteful consumption, I don’t know what is!”

Laplace struck him with another Photon—but this time, his body regenerated before she could even draw blood.

“Heh heh! I’m afraid that won’t work on me any longer!” His lips curled into a haughty smirk. “As my daughter, surely *you* know better than any—waaagh!”

Just then... Maxwell went flying.

“Wow.”

“Sorry for stealing your spotlight, Laplace.”

“Tanya!”

Sure enough, there stood Laplace’s one and only partner, her pink hair fluttering in the breeze. She had run up to the legendary newly-immortal Mage and punched him directly in the jaw.

“*Très forte!* Forget knowledge—*strength* is power!”

“Yeah... Over the past few months, I’ve come to learn that sometimes it’s *way* less hassle to just throw a few punches instead!”

Naturally, the damage done to Maxwell’s jaw was quickly nullified... but the damage to his fragile male ego remained. No one in the past 300 years had *ever* dared to punch the Court Grand Mage. A series of emotions flickered across his face before finally settling on anger.

“Why...? Why do you oppose me?” Maxwell growled at Tanya. “If you would just be a good girl and do as I say, you could stand to gain so much! Think about it: I already have the imperial family under my control. So why are you fighting me over that artificial child? Why are you taking my daughter’s side?!”

But Tanya merely giggled.

“Well now... What do you make of this, Laplace?”

“Hmmm... ‘Why,’ indeed? I’d say it’s a very philosophical question. I didn’t know this incompetent coward had it in him.”

Laplace floated down beside her partner and scooped up the unconscious form of Arianora where Tanya had laid her. Meanwhile, her smile was identical to that of the other woman's... almost as if they were twins.

"Well, the best answer I can think of..."

*"Oui, oui.* The best answer would be..."

Atop the clock tower, its roof long-destroyed from a climactic magical battle, a gust of wind rushed past, ruffling two heads of hair—one pale pink, one inky black and glowing with mana.

They could each think of dozens of reasons to fight him. For all the little girls out there dreaming of adventure. For all the women he'd personally victimized. But at the end of the day, it all came down to one thing: "Because I'm a woman! And given *your* crimes, that's reason enough!"

*"C'est exact.* Because we're women!"

Together, their war cries pierced the night sky.



## 5

“I swear, you only care about saving your own skin.”

Laplace clucked her tongue. No matter how hard she attacked Maxwell, his body’s infinite proliferation healed him right back up again. And although Tanya had returned her mana to her, her current condition was still a far cry from top form.

Worse still—

“Every time you make me regenerate, I absorb more life force from the city. Your rebellion is *hurting the citizens*, Laplace! Haha! Hahahaha!”

“Oh dear! We can’t have that, now can we? That mana’s not yours to play with.”

Indeed, all the mana he used was taken directly from the people of Ode. The more he used to heal his injuries, the more they lost... and one’s mana was directly tied to their health. What if he siphoned all that mana from a sick person? Or a child? Their very lives could be in danger.

“Heh heh! See? You cannot attack me!” Maxwell boasted smugly.

At this, Laplace snorted.

“Oh really? Sorry to say, Maxwell, I think you’re operating under a dire misconception.”

*What an idiot*, Laplace thought to herself.

Maxwell hadn’t gained this power with his own two hands; he’d stolen it the same way he’d stolen everything else. And yet somehow he was still *fully convinced* that he was going to win.

“You may think I’m artificial, but you don’t even know what *you* are.”

“Excuse me?”

“You don’t know what it is you’re stealing. You don’t understand what it means to be immortal. You’re *utterly ignorant*. Honestly, the extent of your delusion...”

Laplace had only gained her power through his human experimentation. She understood that, but it didn't matter right now. Her anger was still her own; Tanya had taught her that.

"I'm immortal too, you know. Trust me, I already know exactly how to kill you."

"What?"

"You want to know why I can't die? Because these magical formulas you embedded in my blood continually generate nearly limitless mana. This experiment only succeeded because I happened to inherit the blood of the Dragon God, but still, you went on to spend the next three centuries trying to make lightning strike twice. You gave me this curse, and then you decided you wanted it for yourself."

Her blood contained a myriad of overlapping magical formulas, including several for automatic regeneration that protected the rest of the formulas from being dismantled. Hence, barring any catastrophic events—such as a magic circle designed to drain all her mana at once—she would never run low, and thus, never die.

"But I know the solution. All you have to do to kill an immortal is drain their mana. Isn't that right, Maxwell?"

"A-And so what if it is?! As it stands, the entire city is keeping me alive. In my current state, I *am* Ode!"

"Heehee. I feel like I've heard that one somewhere before."

His groundless confidence refused to waver, and at this point, Laplace was starting to feel sorry for him. Maybe at one point he'd had a real vision for the future, but he'd long since abandoned every last ounce of self-respect... and it was time to put him out of his misery.

"Okay, Daddy Dumbo, listen up. Your beautiful, talented, adorable, gifted, *gorgeous* daughter is going to clue you in."

No... This was no time for sympathy.

"You've lost this battle, and now you're going to die."

“What?”

“Tanya!”

“At your service!”

“Get little Ari somewhere safe! Also, did you do that one thing?”

“You betcha! It’s in place and ready to go. They don’t call me a Magi-Knight for nothing!”

“Haha! Sounds like something I would say.”

What were they talking about? Maxwell quirked a brow.

Then he noticed that Laplace was staring... at his pocket.

“You didn’t think that punch was just for funsies, did you?” Tanya grinned smugly.

*Of course.* Thinking back, he’d been too distracted by the impact to notice anything else.

Timidly, he reached into his pocket... and felt something hard, thin, and round. A coin.

“Is this—?!”

“How does it feel to be hoisted by your own petard, you villainous scumbag?” Laplace chuckled. “Now then... It’s time you gave me back my mana!”

## 6

Long, long ago, Maxwell had devised a plan that would grant him immortality. He would scatter orichalcum coins, imbued with magical formulas, throughout the city of Ode and drain mana from the citizens. After all, currency is a concept inseparable from civilized society. It was there to be spent or saved; it was rooted in all aspects of daily life.

Back then, Laplace had put a stop to this dastardly plot... and as thanks, she was sealed away for 300 years. But now Maxwell was holding one of those cursed coins in the palm of his hand.



She snapped her fingers—

“Wh... What...?! No...!”

—and activated the very spell he himself had concocted: the mana absorption spell. And because *she* was the one who’d cast it, its power was tenfold. But unlike Maxwell, she wasn’t targeting the entire city. She was targeting only him.

Mana flowed out of his body and into the coin.

“D-Damn it...!”

Desperate to fling the coin away, he tried to move his arm... but his borrowed body wouldn’t respond. All the repeated regeneration had dulled its senses.

“Hee hee! After everything, you *still* think all you have to do is drain more mana from the city, don’t you? It’s written all over your face.”

Just then, the floor beneath them began to shake.

“Wh-What’s happening?”

Was the clock tower shaking?

“Too bad for you... I’ve already drained you dry. As of right now, you’re running on empty.”

No... This was no earthquake.

“Mana, as you know, is life energy. And because I’m never short on mana, I can never die. But if an immortal *were* to lose all their mana—why, they would be rendered mortal, wouldn’t they?”

The vibrations were coming from Laplace herself.

“What?! Your mana flow is making the whole tower shake?!”

“Surely it’s not so infeasible for a Great Sorceress, *non?*”

Brimming with mana, Laplace radiated an ominous aura from head to toe. The coin’s absorption rate was tremendous, easily outpacing the spell that was siphoning the entire city. Actually, no—for some reason, the latter wasn’t draining properly. *Why? What’s going on?*

“*Dites-moi*: how does it feel to lose the power you stole?”

A chill ran down his spine. He had spent 300 years running from death, and now it had caught up to him once more.

“It would be so easy to kill you right now.”

His expression stiffened. *Am... Am I going to die...?*

“D-Don’t...!”

Lit by moonlight, her hair and skirt billowed with the flow of her mana. And the smile on her face exuded all the charm and confidence befitting of a Great Sorceress.

“At this point, I could just snap my fingers and get it over with... but that would be a little too anticlimactic, don’t you think? Instead... I think I’ll kill you with one of my own custom-made spells.”

She took a deep breath... and began her incantation.

“From twilight I summon the ultimate destruction...”

## 7

“What the...? What’s going on?!”

“Perhaps Tanya and Laplace are behind this?!”

Back in the underground laboratory, Katherine and Nadine shrieked in surprise as all the Brides suddenly slumped to the floor like ragdolls. Why? Because their mana was being drained away.

“Wh... What’s happening?” gasped Vis. “My mana... It’s returning...!”

Mana was flowing out of the Brides—specifically, out of the orichalcum coins Nadine had affixed to them—and back to its respective owners. Everyone present felt a revitalizing wave of strength wash over their formerly sluggish bodies.

“Oh, Katherine! Your complexion’s looking nice and rosy again!”

“Likewise.”

“Now all we can do is trust in Tanya and Laplace, I suppose...” Nadine smiled

brightly. “Thank you, Katherine. We couldn’t have done this without your support.”

Katherine chuckled. “I’m glad I had the opportunity to win back your approval after I totally humiliated myself in the Sparring Tournament.”

“Don’t be silly! I never thought badly of you. You were always an excellent student back in school!”

Katherine felt a burgeoning warmth in her chest. It was clear that Nadine trusted her without question... a sentiment she returned in full.

The two of them had done what they could; now all that remained was to believe in Tanya and Laplace—the ultimate duo who had taught them that *anyone*, regardless of gender, had the right to stand up for what they believed in.

Staring at the lifeless Brides, Katherine let out a sigh of relief. “It was a close shave, but fortunately it all worked out and stuff!”

While her Fox-Fireballs *were* streamlined for maximum mana efficiency, she’d been running on fumes back there. Any more and she probably would’ve passed out.

“I gotta say, that was a lot of mana—uh, what the heck are you doing?!”

“Hmm? What do you mean? I’m administering first aid.”

“Excuse me?! Just leave them! What if they get back up and start attacking us again?!”

Katherine stared in shock as Nadine started to cast Heal. *I swear, this chick’s too nice for her own good.* It was almost hard to believe that just moments prior, she’d been darting around the room Assassin-style.

Just then—

“Pardon me, ladies,” Vis cut in. She staggered to her feet, then drew herself up to her full height. “It would appear the mana is flowing in the direction of the clock tower.”

It was obvious that she was worried for the safety of the young princess. Quietly, yet firmly, she declared: “I want the two of you to escort me there.”

## 8

Slowly but surely, the Brides' mana flowed back to Laplace. Now she possessed an amount that outstripped a hundred—no, a *thousand*—ordinary Mages.

As Tanya gazed up at her partner's slender back, she thought to herself: *Man, am I ever glad she's on my side.*

"Nn... nnn..."

"Oh! Your Highness! Are you alright?!"

Then Tanya noticed the color returning to Arianora's cheeks. *Now I get it. Thanks to Laplace, she's starting to regain the mana Maxwell stole from her.*

"Huh...? Lady... Lap...lace...?"

Her violet eyes settled on Laplace, who was currently mid-incantation. Her gaze was full of adoration, like a child looking at her mother, or perhaps her older sister.

"Amazing... She's so... awesome...!"

## 9

As for which spell Laplace was casting, this hadn't eluded Tanya's notice. Of all the spells Tanya herself had mastered during her years as an adventurer, it was the strongest in her arsenal. And while Laplace could achieve the same effect with a mere snap of her fingers, instead, she was purposely choosing to cast it the long way.

"From twilight I summon the ultimate destruction," she began in her usual singsong voice. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

As it turned out, Laplace had invented this incantation herself 300 years ago. And 300 years later, thanks to a certain pink-haired Mage, it would become the very spell that set her free... so she recited every word with perfect clarity, as though carving it into stone.

Maxwell began to panic.

“S-Stop! You... You can’t use that spell on a human being! It’s meant for demolishing castles, or—or entire armies! I... All I ever wanted was for someone to acknowledge my talent! Do you understand what it’s like to be disrespected by your own wife?! By your own *daughter*?!”

Just then—someone grabbed Laplace’s hand.

“Laplace!”

“Oh... hello, Tanya.”

Tanya had just finished evacuating Arianora to a safe location. Laplace clasped her hand in return. *With Tanya by my side, I can’t possibly back down.*

Meanwhile, Maxwell screamed and wailed like he thought he was some sort of tragic hero.

“I just wanted someone to tell me I mattered! I’m the victim here...!”

“And so what if you were? That doesn’t give you the right to oppress other people,” Laplace declared coldly.

As it happened, she wasn’t the first person to do something as reckless as cast an Arcane-level spell on a fellow human. No, she took her inspiration from the woman who had taught her that she was allowed to get angry—allowed to summon up all her strength and *fight back* against perpetrators of injustice.

And that woman was the most heroic person Laplace had ever known.

“Laplace?”

*See? Just listen to her strong voice, full of kindness.*

“Yes?”

And when she resumed her casting, that strong voice joined hers in perfect synchronicity.

“Heed my call—AND UNLEASH YOUR MIGHT!”

Their words echoed across the night sky.

“Well, this is goodbye, Maxwell... you sad son of a bitch.”

With his mana drained, he was now merely a mortal man.

“Take this! **EXPLOSION!!!**”

The blinding white light consumed everything, drowning out all sound. It engulfed the man who had spent the past 300 years controlling Ode from the shadows—the man who was driven to evil by his inferiority complex regarding women—and burned him to ash.

## 10

The blinding, sky-piercing flash lasted for what felt like an eternity. When Tanya finally opened her eyes... the first thing she saw was the starry sky above them. Light crept up from beyond the eastern horizon. Dawn was breaking.

“Wow... We blew away all the clouds!”

At the end of this final battle, 300 years in the making, the “clock” portion of the clock tower had been completely erased, and now all that remained—  
“Yaaaay! We win! Were you watching, Tanya?”

—was a beautiful Sorceress.

“Yeah... I saw the whole thing.”

At last, Laplace had exacted her revenge.

The Magi-Knight raised her hand, the golden ring gleaming upon her finger. No further words were exchanged—just a high-five.

Meanwhile, in the shadows of the wreckage, a certain imperial princess had witnessed the whole thing. The chains that had bound her, her family, and her country were no more. She had endured horrible abuse, and now, finally, she no longer needed to keep up the charade. For the first time in her life, Arianora Aweigkorrt was free to stand on her own two feet. Free to dream of the day she’d grow up to be just like the women of Liliu.

“The sun is rising.”

Here stood a little girl who dreamed of adventure, looking up at the first rays

of dawn.

“Hey, Tanya? It’s... It’s over now, right?” asked Laplace.

She stripped off her constricting shoes and stood on the ground, her bare feet covered in cuts and blisters.

“I feel fantastic right now... Like the two of us could run a marathon barefoot.”

Her voice was joyful and mournful at the same time.

“Laplace...”

But before Tanya could respond—

“Freeze! Step away from Princess Arianora!”

There was a metallic click.

“...Huh?”

Slowly, they turned to find themselves face to face with dozens of arrows and magic staves pointed in their direction. The castle guards and Court Mages had them surrounded.

## Epilogue: Promoted to Rank S+

### 1

*Well, here's a plot twist, Tanya snarked to herself.*

After their spectacular victory at the break of dawn, surely no one would've seen something like *this* coming.

"We're in jail!!! *Again!!!*"

"Hahahaha! *Mon dieu*, this is hilarious!"

"This isn't funny, Laplace!"

Atop the clock tower, with their arch-nemesis vanquished, they basked in the glory of their accomplishment—and the vague sense of emptiness that followed—as the morning sky grew brighter and brighter.

Eventually Nadine and Katherine arrived with Vis in tow. And as soon as the woman in white had confirmed her princess to be safe and sound, the captain of the guard had ordered them to stand down and surrender.

At dawn, the sleeping spell Laplace had cast upon them had worn off, and so they had come running when they heard the Explosion. That said... no matter how many elite soldiers they called to the scene, they didn't stand a chance against the Great Sorceress now that she had carried out her retribution and regained her mana. Their lives were essentially in her hands.

So what would she choose to do?

The answer, of course, was "roll with it."

*"Hahaha! Sure, I could go for a nap right about now! I'm feeling generous—maybe I'll take a vacation in one of your cozy little prison cells."*

Naturally, Tanya understood where she was coming from, but—

"...If they find out we nuked the Court Grand Mage off the face of the earth,



I'm pretty sure they're going to give us the death sentence...!"

She clutched at her hair in distress. Of course, since Maxwell was very literally erased from existence, there was next to no chance they'd find any evidence connecting Laplace to the crime... but even so, it was plainly obvious they'd destroyed the clock tower.

"Hahaha! Why do you look so scared, Tanya? If worse comes to worst, your old friend the Great Sorceress will take care of it! I could bust us out of here, no problem!"

"Yeah, I get that, but—"

"Besides... I owe you a lot for all your help with my revenge. From now on, I'll always be on your side. Together, the two of us will be unstoppable."

"...Laplace..."

She felt something warm in her chest. Laplace's gentle smile exuded unwavering trust and deep affection... but...

"Real talk—I think we're allowed to get upset that they arrested us!"

*To everyone I left back home—my mom, my brothers and sisters, my two cats—sorry in advance if someone knocks on the door to interrogate you about me. Please don't tell them anything.*

"What's so bad about the castle dungeons? No one ever comes here," Laplace shrugged, winking playfully.

"Probably because you loaded the place with traps on par with—you know, the *other* kind of dungeon!"

"Plus, it's comfy here."

"Only because you transmogrified a bunch of bricks to make a tea set, and last I checked, that's forbidden magic!"

"*Non, non!* It wasn't forbidden back in my day!"

"Okay, well, it is now!!!"

"Hahaha! Oh, how far Pajan has fallen!"

Tanya heaved an exasperated sigh.

*Lord help me, I'm going to strangle this woman.*

*But on the other hand... it's nice to see her smiling again...*

"Wh—you're going back to bed?!"

"Oh, settle down, Tanya. Katherine and Nadine are both sleeping, are they not? We should join them."

"Frankly, I don't know how they could possibly sleep at a time like this!"

"Now, now, they both worked themselves to the bone today. They need their rest to recover the mana they lost."

Tanya stared in disbelief as the other two members of Liliu lay sound asleep in the king-sized bed Laplace had conjured for them. *Seriously, of all the inopportune times for a catnap... Am I the only sane woman here? I thought for sure Nadine would be on my side!*

"Mmm..."

"Oh, she's awake."

"Hmm? Oh, good morning, Tanya."

Nadine offered her a sleepy smile. She seemed happier now that she'd had some much-needed rest... A little *too* happy, in fact... She almost seemed to be glowing... *You doing okay, Nadine?*

Next to her lay a certain blonde foxkin girl, sleeping with a contented smile on her face... *Am I missing something?*

"I guess I really needed that nap!"

"Yeahhhh... Fair warning, you've got *major* bedhead right now."

"Aack!" Nadine hastily pressed her lavender hair flat against her head. Behind her thick lenses, her eyes sparkled. "Wake up, Katherine."

"Meow...?"

"*Meow?!?*"

"I thought you were supposed to be a fox!" Tanya shouted before she could stop herself.

Just then, Nadine tensed up.

“Someone’s coming.”

## 2

It was Arianora. She was dressed not in her pajamas from last night, but in a beautifully embroidered dress embedded with violet gems signifying her royal status. This was Arianora Aweigkorrt, the Crown Princess of Pajan.

“Wait, what? How did she evade your traps?”

Somehow, this young girl had walked straight through the equivalent of an adventurers’ dungeon.

“Oh, right. About that... My traps are designed not to activate against us.”

“ ‘Us’? What do you mean...?”

“You, me, Nadine, or Katherine, obviously.”

“What? But—”

“And Ari counts as me.”

“Oh!”

Tanya clapped her hands together in understanding. In order to create Arianora and the other Brides, Maxwell had essentially cloned Laplace. Evidently their mana signatures were so similar, even Laplace’s spells could be fooled into thinking the Princess was the Sorceress.

Accompanying Arianora was a crowd of attendants her same age—Katherine took one look at them and yelped.

“What the?! You all survived?!”

“Yes, thanks to your perfect heat control,” they all responded in perfect unison.

There were slight variations in their physical appearances—some had dark hair, others had blonde or even white hair—but they all shared the same facial features, and each of them was the spitting image of Laplace herself.

These were the girls from the laboratory—the Brides that Katherine had done her best not to injure with her Fox-Fireballs.

“Whoa... They can *talk*!” Tanya exclaimed. Apparently they were more than just creepy puppets.

“All thanks to you for putting an end to Maxwell’s reign of terror,” Arianora explained, standing tall and proud among her sisters. She smiled. “Members of Liliun, I am prepared to hold an audience with you... Come and see me when you’re ready.”

And with that, Arianora turned on her heel and left the dungeon.

### 3

As Tanya and the others entered the audience chamber, they gasped and marveled at its beauty and opulence.

“Holy crap...!”

Stained glass windows. Velvet drapery. A vaulted ceiling. Not a single decoration out of place.

Surrounded by rows of guards on both sides, they walked forward. Ahead of them was a small, but swanky, staircase leading up to a platform. There, two thrones had been erected: one for the ruler of Pajan, and next to it a smaller version of the same chair.

“So this is Liliun, is it?” asked the man sitting on the larger throne, his expression a bitter scowl.

*Holy crap, I recognize this guy,* thought Tanya.

*You see portraits of him everywhere,* thought Nadine.

*It’s the friggin’ Emperor!* thought Katherine.

Growing up, they’d only seen pictures of this man... But now here he was, right in front of them. And for some reason, the man himself didn’t look anywhere near as gallant as he did in all the paintings.

Put bluntly—

“Hey there, mister, who pissed in your cereal this morning?” Laplace snarked.

“Pfffffft!”

Tanya’s shoulders shook as she tried to hold in her laughter. To be fair, Laplace had only voiced what everyone else was already thinking. The Emperor looked ghostly pale and absolutely miserable.

“Allow us to ask you directly. Last night, the top of the Ode Castle clock tower was obliterated using an inhumanly powerful magical attack. Ordinarily we would have Maxwell the Court Grand Mage investigate this, but as of now, he seems to have vanished.”

Tanya flinched. *Yes, that’s right! Guilty as charged! We destroyed the clock tower, and then we watched the sunrise. All in all, it was a total blast! Ugh, we can’t tell him that... er... can we...?*

Just then, it occurred to her: had any of them actually done anything wrong?

Nadine and Katherine stood close together, both of them gazing at Tanya. Meanwhile, Laplace was shadowboxing the air in front of her and muttering “You gonna sentence me? Huh? Huh?”

No... He wasn’t going to sentence them. After all, they hadn’t actually done anything wrong. Sure, they’d destroyed Maxwell’s 300-year legacy—but so what? So what if he was a war hero? After everything he’d done to oppress women all across the Empire, he kind of had it coming.

So Tanya took a deep breath and said:

“That’s right. Laplace and I destroyed the clock tower and obliterated Maxwell. It was all our doing.”

“Tanya!” Nadine gasped.

All around them, the castle guards gasped in surprise. There was a long moment of silence —so long, they started to wonder if it would ever end. But eventually, the Emperor broke the tension with a heavy sigh.

“Then it appears the report was indeed accurate.”

“R-Report?”

Just then, they heard the *clack, clack, clack* of high heels. Reflexively, they turned to look as the guards around them all dropped to one knee in perfect unison.

Standing at the door to the audience chamber was—

“Princess Arianora!”

“Lady Tanya! Lady Laplace!”

She took one look at them and smiled gleefully, her eyes sparkling. Next to her stood—

“...Uhh...?”

Like Arianora, this woman had white hair and a slender frame. Her eyes were red in hue, but it was the familiar expression on her face that finally clued Tanya in:

“Vis...?”

Indeed, it was Vis, the princess’s attendant. But now that she was holding hands with Arianora, their relationship seemed less master-servant and more... sororal. Their pale hair glittered in the light, oddly reminiscent of the Brides from the laboratory.

“Hee hee!” Vis giggled, her red eyes shining mischievously. “I admit, I’m sure it must come as a surprise.”

Her dignified voice carried across the room. And there, atop her closely-cropped silvery hair—was the crown of the Empress.

“Wh... Who are you?!”

“My name is Vistalia. Vistalia Aweigkorrt.”

“Wait... but that’s...”

“Yes. I am the Emperor’s wife... or the Empress, if you prefer.”

“Wh... *WHAT?!?*”

Their unmitigated shock made Arianora burst out laughing.

“Empress Vistalia died in a carriage accident. That’s what we told the public,”

the Emperor explained quietly. “And it’s true, Vistalia did in fact die that day. But one of our Court Mages was deeply invested in immortality research—and since he’d already lived for 300 years, we succumbed to the temptation.”

“You mean...?”

“Soul transferral is forbidden sorcery to the utmost degree, we... no, the entire Imperial Family... we all owe a great debt to that man and his magic. When tragedy befell our beloved daughter, Maxwell brought us a new one, and we adopted her. That is the girl you know as Arianora. Likewise, when our Empress passed in an unforeseen accident, we... we...”

“Allow me to take over from here,” Vistalia told him quietly.

Her voice was full of love.

## 4

“When I awoke, word of my death had already spread far and wide. My only option, then, was to serve as Arianora’s attendant, ‘Vis,’ instead,” explained Vis—or rather, Empress Vistalia.

Maxwell’s reign of terror had spanned three centuries. Though she was at least permitted to keep her own identity, Arianora was nonetheless subjected to night after night of inhumane experimentation—and Vistalia was forced to watch from the sidelines. After all, Maxwell had the entire Imperial Family in the palm of his hand.

“I knew about the artificial humans he was creating—and killing—in his laboratory. I knew about the plot to drain mana from Ode. And... I knew that it was he who had taken my soul and placed it into a new vessel after my death, at the request of the Emperor. I witnessed it all as Vis, my daughter’s attendant.”

At this, the Emperor slumped his shoulders and sighed heavily. “It seems we were in the wrong,” he muttered.

Maxwell had the power to fight death itself... and in exchange for access to that power, the Imperial Family turned a blind eye to his petty ambitions and ignored the suffering that was happening right under their noses.

What did they gain from opposing him?

Nothing.

“If our beloved wife claims that Maxwell was a wicked man, erased at the hands of these fine women... then we have no choice but to believe her.”

“It’s the truth. These ladies, the members of Liliun, have saved our family—saved the Empire itself.”

Just then, Arianora rose to her feet. “Um, Empress Vistalia? By ‘family,’ do you mean—”

“Arianora...”

“No, no, I know I’m an impostor! I’m just a puppet pretending to be the princess—”

Vistalia gently held up a hand to stop her. “I was right by your side every step of the way, and I know exactly how hard it was for you. Make no mistake, you are every bit my daughter, as well as our beloved princess. Always have been, always will be.”

“Queen Vistalia...!”

“Heh! Say, would you call me Vis, like you used to?”

“Vis...”

“Alternatively... Let’s see... If possible, I’d like it if you called me Mother.”

“M... Mother...?”

This was something she’d been dying to ask but—until now—never could. Beside her, the Emperor stared down at the floor, clenching his fists.

Tears in her eyes, Arianora ran over and gave Vistalia a big hug. The woman smiled softly, then turned her attention back to Tanya and the others.

“Now then, members of Liliun...”

“Yes?”

Vistalia grinned. “You’ve uncovered the Imperial Family’s secret, haven’t you?”



“Huh?”

Her words didn’t seem to match her radiant smile—nor did they match what came next.

5

————

NOTICE

Adventurers’ Guild Rank C Party “Lilium”

By Imperial order, the party listed above shall be promoted to Rank S+ for their exemplary service.

Henceforth, this party shall serve the Imperial Family exclusively.

————

A crowd of Ode citizens buzzed excitedly as they gathered around the bulletin board in the central plaza.

“You’re kidding! Rank S+?!”

“Eeeee! Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, I’m so happy for them!”

“We should celebrate in Lady Tanya’s honor!”

“Heh heh heh... I’ve seen this coming ever since I watched them compete in the Sparring Tournament.”

“Nice try, bro.”

It had been more than ten years since an adventurers’ party was promoted to Rank S+ to serve the Imperial Family officially—and this was the first time in the nation’s history that the party to receive said accolade was staffed entirely by women.

At the bottom of this imperial decree was the following postscript:

————

Reason For Promotion:

For the heroic deeds they performed to resolve a national crisis... and for the unending hope they have inspired in all the little girls out there, dreaming of adventure.

— — — —

## 6

Truth be told, after the audience with the Imperial Family, Tanya was exhausted. Rank S+? Employed directly by the Empire? She could scarcely believe it. But according to the Empress, “Now that you know our secrets, we’ll need to keep you close at hand.”

*Clever.* It made perfect sense. After all, Lilium could pose a liability to the Imperial Family otherwise. Tanya was starting to think maybe that attendant-turned-Empress had been planning to do this the moment someone got rid of Maxwell. *What a woman... I’d better not get on her bad side.*

Just then—

“Hey, Tanya?”

“Huh?” Tanya turned to find a young man standing there, dressed in a guard’s uniform, his expression serious. “H-How can I help you?” she asked.

He stared at her for a moment, then seemed to struggle for words. Reflexively, Tanya felt her guard go up. Was he going to make snarky comments about her gender or something? Tell her she didn’t deserve it? That the whole thing was just “affirmative action at work”? Her mind filled with memories of all the horrible things men had said to her over the years.

“L-Listen, um!” the man stammered in a shaky voice.

“Y-Yeah?!” Tanya yelped.

“I... I’m a big fan of your party!!!”

“...What?”

“Your, um, your speech at the Sparring Tournament!” he blurted out, blushing. “For me it was really, um, really touching? And I started thinking, you

know, maybe I could change my life and start chasing my dreams! See, 'cause I was born in the slums, so everyone always told me I'd never be able to afford it, so I gave up on it, but after all the stuff you said, I thought, *maybe I should really go for it!* So after I left the arena, I went and applied with the Imperial Guards, and...!"

Shyly, he extended his hand.

The Sparring Tournament had set the stage for Tanya's ultimate revenge. No one had believed an all-female party would take first place... but they did. And the speech Tanya had given at the award ceremony had proudly dedicated their victory to "all the little girls out there dreaming of adventure."

But evidently this speech had inspired more than just little girls.

"So anyway, um, Tanya, if it's cool with you... would you shake my hand?"

Seeing his bashful smile, Tanya's heart ached. She had assumed that, because he was male, he would prove to be an asshole—that he wouldn't relate to her struggle. *Ugh... That really wasn't cool of me.* Cursing herself, she stared down at the floor.

Just then, she felt someone poke her in the stomach.

"Hey hey, Tanya!"

"Oh... Hi, Laplace."

"Times like these, you ought to hold your head up high!"

"...Right."

Tanya held out her hand and placed it in his. Delighted, the man clasped it and shook it vigorously, like a kid half his age.

Afterwards, right as he was about to return to his post, she called after him.

"Hey!"

"Yes?! What is it, ma'am?!"

"Um... I don't really know how to say this, but... Thank you for everything you said just now. Really."

He wasn't a creep—he was just an ordinary young person like any other. And

when the words *thank you* left her lips, his eyes widened at this show of gratitude from his hero. Then he smiled.

“Likewise! Thank you so much—for talking to me, and for giving me the push I needed to chase my dreams, and for being a total badass in the tournament!”

“Oh... Sure, no problem. I wish you all the best.”

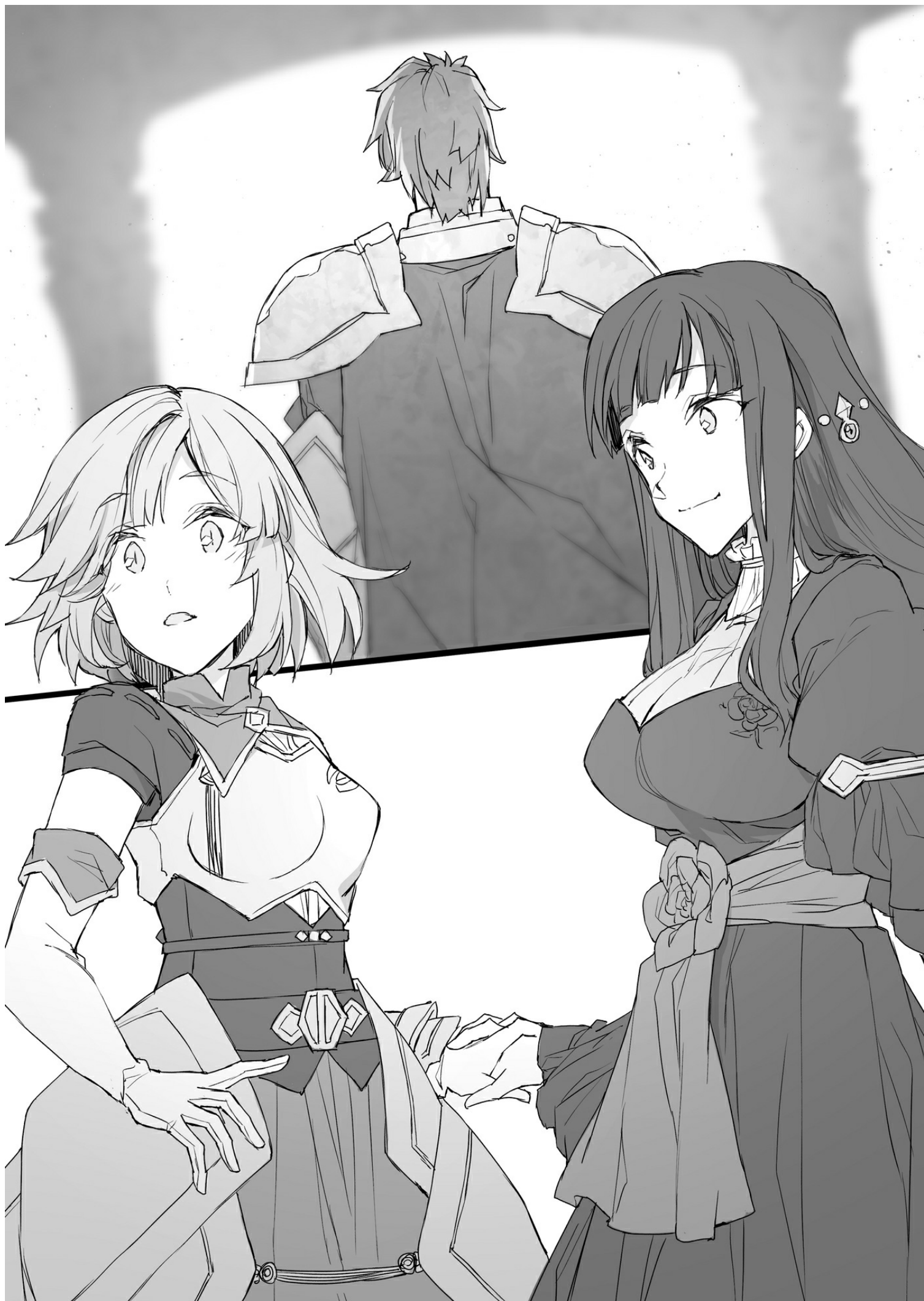
“You too! See ya!”

Grinning from ear to ear, the man jogged off. For a moment, Tanya watched him go in silence... but then Laplace spoke.

“Hey, Tanya? How about you wipe that stupid smile off your face, hmm?”

“Oh, lay off. I can be happy about this, can’t I? This is more important than any rank promotion.”

Gently, Laplace took Tanya’s hand.



Meanwhile, Tanya thought back to younger days back in her hometown. Once upon a time, she, too, had been a little girl dreaming of adventure. And now her words and actions were inspiring others to pursue their own happiness. She had saved a young girl from a fate worse than death. And unbeknownst to her, her beliefs had offered encouragement to a young man who had let others convince him he was too poor to accomplish his goals.

*Male or female, it doesn't matter. The circumstances of your birth should never deter you from following your heart.*

“Hey, Laplace?”

“What is it, Tanya?”

“This is the happiest I’ve ever been in my whole life.”

As she held Laplace’s hand with her left hand, she stared down at her right—the hand the man had shaken earlier: it was the sweatiest handshake she had ever experienced.

Going forward, she would do whatever it took to fight against discrimination. For the little girls out there, dreaming of adventure. And for the little boys, too, who dreamed of becoming Healers. But most of all—

*“Oui, oui. I could say the same myself, Tanya.”*

—for her trusty partner who had endured 300 years of injustice to stand here with her today, her revenge fulfilled.

“Thank you, Laplace.”

*I love you.*

# Afterword

Good day to you. My name is Kaeruda Ameko.

Thank you for reading Volume 2 of *Sexiled: My Sexist Party Leader Kicked Me Out, So I Teamed Up With A Mythical Sorceress!* This volume has been touched up significantly compared to the web version. I hope you enjoyed it.

*Sexiled* is a story about fighting sexism, and in Volume 2 I touched upon painful shoes and toxic fathers. In fact, right as I was writing the chapter about shoes, I watched in amazement as the #KuToo anti-heels movement took off on social media online. That was pretty wild.

I have a confession to make: both myself and my editor, Y-san, completely forgot about the afterword until the manuscript for Volume 2 was already completed. So now here I am, jotting something down to add at the end! You could consider it a “forgotten text” or something... Oh, that makes it sound kind of poignant.

Thank you to Miya Kazutomo-sensei for depicting all of Liliu's most impressive moments in badass fashion. I'd also like to thank my editor, Y-san, as well as all the readers who support me. (I got some fanmail in response to Volume 1. Thank you, reader from Kyoto and reader from Kanazawa!) You all have my deepest gratitude. Thanks to you, I've been able to tell a story I truly love.

Now then, until the next time we meet... good day to you!

(P.S. These days I've started saying “good day to you” all the time. It's just so versatile!)

## Bonus Short Stories

### Nadine's Cooking Challenge, Part 1: The Proper Equipment

Nadine had always longed to learn how to cook.

Born to a family of Assassins, she had grown up viewing food purely as a source of energy in between training sessions. While she enjoyed eating meat for her required protein intake, in order to stay toned, she had always wished she could eat purely for enjoyment's sake.

She was a master of poisons, but when it came to seasonings, she was a total amateur.

"In that case, why don't I show you the ropes? Everybody's gotta start somewhere!"

"That voice...!"

That shiny blonde hair! Those pointy ears!

"Heh heh! Katherine Foxxi, future owner of the Little Vixen, to the rescue!"

The beautiful Mage stood with her hands on her hips, wearing a white smock over her regular clothes, her sleeves all rolled up.

"Whoa... What on earth are you wearing, Katherine?"

"Pretty dorky, huh? This is a traditional foxkin apron called a *kappougi*. It protects your skin and clothes from kitchen spills. It's strictly functional, but in a way, that makes it even cuter. Beautility at its finest! Y'know?"

"Beautility..." Nadine pondered the word. *Beauty plus utility*.

Growing up, she was raised to always choose function over form. When it came to clothes, it was easier to throw on a loose-fitting dress and be done with it. That way she could carry her weapons close to her body.

"The regulars love to complain about it, but I mean, you see male chefs



wearing white uniforms all the time, am I right?”

“Good point.”

“So yeah, when I’m working in the kitchen, it’s all about safety first!”

“I agree it’s good to be well-equipped. And your *kappougi* has nice long sleeves, so I imagine it’ll protect your arms much better than a regular apron.”

And so Nadine decided: if she wanted to learn to cook, first she needed to dress like a cook.

“Could I possibly borrow that?” she asked.

Katherine grinned. “You bet!”

“Wow! I definitely feel protected wearing this!”

Big, round glasses. Lavender pigtail braids. And a white smock over a curvy body.

Nothing could possibly be more adorable... Except...

“Uh, Nadine?”

“Yes?”

“Wh-What’s with the knife?”

“Huh? Oh, um, I heard these are used to cut meat.”

“I mean, yeah, they are... but if we’re just making popcorn chicken, we don’t need a cleaver!”

“O-Oh... I see...”

“Everybody’s gotta start somewhere... I can do this, I can do this...!”

Could she turn this total novice into a regular chef? This was one challenge Katherine couldn’t wait to tackle!

From then on, customers at the Little Vixen occasionally caught sight of a young woman in braids and a *kappougi* peeling potatoes in the kitchen. She was frequently seen following the owner’s granddaughter around the restaurant like

a faithful puppy, which only made her all the more popular. But whenever some uncultured swine attempted to make a pass at this bespectacled beauty, he was inevitably treated to a shower of blue Fireballs...

## Nadine's Cooking Challenge, Part 2: Rolled Omelets

Today found Nadine itching to make rolled omelets. Why, you ask? Because the members of Lilium had recently gone on a picnic to the park. And while they were eating, Nadine overheard one Katherine Foxxi saying how rolled omelets were “the best packed lunch food, like, ever.”

Katherine had been giving Nadine cooking lessons at the Little Vixen, and now Nadine had discovered her teacher's favorite food. Katherine Foxxi, the dedicated hard worker with glamorous good looks, liked rolled omelets... so Nadine was going to make them.

But when it came to rolled omelets, there was one major point of contention...

“Sweet or salty...? That's the real question here.”

Standing in the kitchen of the Little Vixen, Nadine stared down at the different seasonings lined up in front of her. On the counter next to her was a basket full of eggs. It was early in the morning, so she had the space to herself for a while, but she'd need to cook *and* clean up before the restaurant opened for business a few hours from now. There was no time to waste.

Did Katherine prefer her omelets sweet or salty? As someone with very limited cooking experience, this hurdle was a big one to overcome.

“First things first... I might as well get started and experiment.”

Summoning her resolve, Nadine rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

Sitting on the counter were two items one would normally never see in a kitchen: a stack of weighing paper and a pair of scales.

“I never know what it means when the recipe calls for a ‘pinch’ or a ‘spoonful’ of something... It's too vague. If I'm doing this, I'm doing it my way!”

Growing up in a family of Assassins, Nadine was trained from an early age to handle medicines and poisons—substances that were always measured precisely. She prided herself on following instructions to the letter.

Of course, she hoped that someday she could learn to measure things at a glance, the way Katherine could... But for now, Nadine was going to stay within her comfort zone, using the methods that felt the most natural to her.

The front door swung open, its bells clanging loudly.

“Good morning!” Katherine called as she walked in with a box full of freshly procured ingredients. “Wait, what the...?”

She could smell something sweet.

“What the—Katherine?!”

Blushing, Nadine peeked her head out from the kitchen.

“Aha!” Katherine shouted the instant she laid eyes on her. “You’re practicing in there, aren’t you?”

“Uhh... well... yes...”

“Cool, cool. Let’s see what’s on the menu!”

“Wha—hey! Katherine!”

Katherine walked into the kitchen, sniffed all the little omelets lined up on the counter, and popped one into her mouth.

“Hmmm... Very sweet!”

“Is... Is that bad?!” Nadine’s eyes filled with tears. *I had a one-in-two chance and I STILL got it wrong?!*

“No, no, it’s good! It’s a little burnt, but I actually kinda like that!”

“R-Really?!” Nadine beamed brightly—a much more open display of emotion than was usual for her.

Katherine’s heart skipped a beat. *I always thought she was just a prissy little wallflower, but... the more time I spend with her, the more new sides I find...*

“Nothing wrong with a little sweetness.”

“O-Oh... That’s good...”

For the record, the way Katherine usually made her rolled omelets was... by

not adding any seasoning whatsoever.

## Nadine's Cooking Challenge, Part 3: Sandwiches

That night, Nadine asked a single, fateful question:

"Katherine, would you like to be my partner in crime?"

\*\*\*

Meat. Lots and lots of meat.

It was late at night, and the Little Vixen was closed, but there was still food on the table: Court Grand Roast Pork, the latest addition to the menu, plus a soft, fluffy loaf of bread.

Of course, by this point, there wasn't much of it left.

"When you said 'be my partner in crime,' I didn't know *this* was what you meant," said Katherine.

"Oh... Sorry... I just couldn't bear to wait," said Nadine.

Meat was her all-time favorite food, but because she carried herself in a meek, unassuming manner, the people around her tended to jump to one very misguided conclusion: that she liked sweets.

"This morning I was craving a sandwich, but when I went to buy one, the shopkeeper insisted on giving me his 'specialty sandwiches' for free. Obviously I appreciated the gesture, and they were all very good, but... well..."

They were all fruit sandwiches. Dessert sandwiches, in other words. For the record, they were all perfectly edible, but what Nadine *wanted* was something hearty and filling.

"So I was left craving meat sandwiches all day long!"

"...You know, I've been thinking... Is everyone in Lilium a total glutton, or what?"

"Well, you've seen the way Tanya wolfs down every meal like it's the best thing she's ever tasted! It's contagious!"

"Right... So why invite *me*?"

“Oh... Well... I was thinking perhaps you and I could make something together... If that’s alright with you, Katherine,” Nadine explained with a shy smile.

Katherine stared back in shock.

Not even in her most unlikely dreams had she imagined she’d ever be sitting here with *Nadine* of all people. While the two women were in the same graduating class back in adventuring school, Katherine was a popular Magic Academy graduate and straight-A student in the Mage course, while Nadine was a forgettable wallflower in the Healer course.

“Stop that.”

“Huh?”

“Stop calling me Katherine. We’re old friends from school, remember? It’s... y’know... It’s just kinda needlessly weird and formal, don’t you think?”

“Wait, so... you mean...?”

“Call me Kathy.”

“What?!”

“...Or whatever other nickname you want. Anything but Katherine. And in return, I’ll call you Nadi.”

“O-Okay then... Kathy it is.” It almost felt like they were... friends... Nadine smiled to herself. “Kathy,” she repeated, testing the sound on her tongue once more.

This was followed by a mildly awkward silence.

“A-Alright then, let’s make some sandwiches or whatever!”

And so the Little Vixen’s poster girl rolled up her sleeves.

### **How to Make a Court Grand Roast Pork Sandwich:**

Step 1—Lightly toast two slices of bread.

Step 2—Spread a healthy amount of mustard and mayonnaise onto each slice.

Step 3—Place thin slices of dried pork tenderloin (in this case, restaurant leftovers) on top of one slice.

Step 4—Slice a leek into julienne strips and place atop the pork.

Step 5—Place the other slice of bread neatly on top of the julienned leek, sauce-side down, and pat into place.

Step 6—Cut in half and serve.

Nadine let out an awestruck gasp. “It... It looks so good...!”

“Yeah, well, it’ll *taste* good, too.” Katherine chuckled, satisfied with her accomplishment.

And right as they were having a taste test—

“We’re baaaack!”

“*Mon dieu*, this Sorceress is starving!”

—the bell over the door jangled, and in walked Tanya and Laplace, who had just finished a quest for the Guild.

“Whoa, what’s that? It looks good!” Tanya exclaimed when she saw their plates.

“Heehee... It tastes good, too,” Nadine replied.

“Did you make it?”

“No, it was all Katheri—I mean, Kathy.”

“Yeah, but *you* bought the bread, Nadi,” Katherine pointed out.

“Graduated to pet names, have we?” Laplace asked with a knowing smirk.

“Oh... um...” Nadine faltered... but just then, the conversation was interrupted by a loud gurgle.

“Hahaha... Sorry about that!” Tanya grinned, almost bashful. “We haven’t eaten anything since lunch.”

“Well, we still have enough fixings for another sandwich,” said Nadine, rising from her chair. “Why don’t I make you one? Will you, um... supervise me,



Kathy?”

“Sure thing!”

Tanya and Laplace exchanged a look as the two headed off into the kitchen together as if they had always been the best of friends.

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